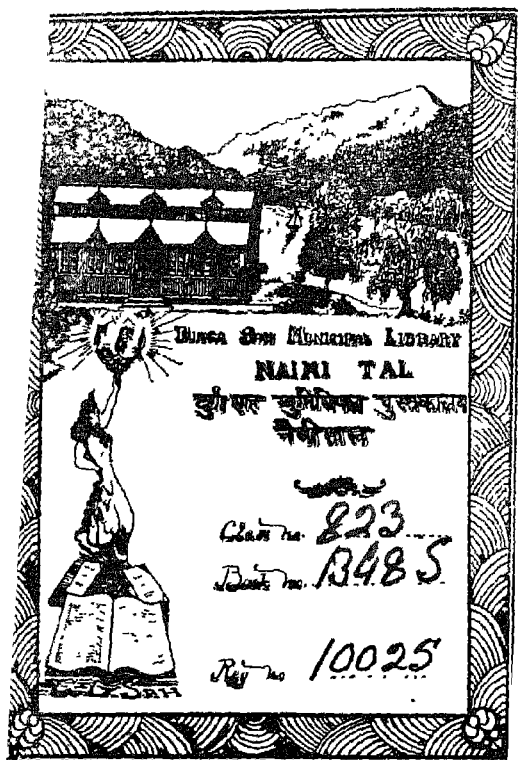




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This entertaining and frequently touching first novel is the story of a young girl poised between innocence and experience.

Nicky Hapgood, at 21, tells her story in her own rather slangy but self-revealing style. She is pretty and has more sex appeal than her over-privileged, over-protected existence has equipped her to handle. She drifts through a boarding school which is as alarming as any institution on this side of the Atlantic, and at college slips into a strangely passive engagement to a presentable but desperately dull young man called Bradley. But the relationship is not too demanding; Bradley is far away and can only write daily letters and make dutiful appearances on infrequent week-ends, but he serves as an excuse for avoiding an emotional involvement with men closer at hand.

Only Nicky's perceptive younger brother sees Bradley for what he is—"an amiable jerk"—and, despite her misgivings, Nicky is unable to admit even to herself that the engagement is a mistake. After her graduation from college she is borne helplessly towards marriage. As her parents enthusiastically plan a huge wedding Nicky feels more and more confused and depressed but is unable to escape from the trap into which she unwittingly walked.

Seeing Bradley against his almost professionally Southern home background brings the bars of the cage close to her face, and she explodes into rebellion and finds final and violent means of solving her dilemma and coming to terms with herself.

Anne Bernays captures the freshness and humour of youth in a faithful rendering of the way in which Nicky thinks and speaks. In her guileless and trusting acquisition of experience she retains something of her initial innocence and this ensures her emotional freedom.

SHORT PLEASURES

Anne Bernays

Nicky Hapgood at twenty-one has more sex appeal than her over-privileged, over-protected existence has equipped her to handle. She drifts from childhood through boarding school and junior college into a strangely passive engagement to a dull but presentable man called Bradley. Only her younger brother sees Bradley for what he is — an amiable jerk. After her graduation Nicky is borne helplessly along towards marriage. As her parents enthusiastically prepare a huge wedding she feels more and more depressed, but is unable to escape until, on the wedding's eve, she finds a violent and painful means of solving her dilemma and coming to terms with herself.

SHORT
PLEASURES

a novel by

ANNE BERNAYS

SECKER & WARBURG
LONDON

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Received on Jan 1972

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A. Wheaton & Co. Ltd., Exeter*

To Justin

Live while ye may,

Yet happy pair; enjoy, till I return,

Short pleasures.

PARADISE LOST

*SHORT
PLEASURES*

I

MY MOTHER THOUGHT there was always something wrong with me. I think it must have started when I was very young—oh, maybe two or three years old. I don't want to go at length into my childhood because, mainly, it's pretty boring. But certain things do seem important to me. And if I'm going to tell "my story" I think I ought to tell the truth, and some of my past, short as it is, still speaks to me so fiercely that not to tell you about it would be like not telling the whole truth—and then what would be the sense of going into anything?

It was my mother, then, who was convinced there was something the matter with me. And that fact seems odd to me for two reasons. First, it was Mother, not my father, who worried every time I sneezed or broke out or got a stomach-ache, or whatever. And second, I was so pretty that she really ought not to have spent so much time fussing about my health. I was a radiant, pink-cheeked, wavy-haired blond little girl with two neat dimples and a smile like Shirley Temple's. I'm not saying that because I was especially pretty I couldn't get sick too, like other children, but that (and now I'm trying to imagine myself in her place—a mother) she ought to have been more pleased with me, physically, and not gone prospecting for ailments. As for my father, he was quite out of it. He would pay the doctor bills so he must, at least,

have dimly approved of what Mother was spending the money on, but he never got involved with the doctors and he never talked about them to me. The scratch tests, patch tests, eye tests, cold shots, etc., all took place out of his sight; he ignored them. It was as if he were humoring his wife the way other men would, only in place of tolerating a passion for hats or weekly trips to the theater, he was tolerating trips to the doctor.

When I was about seven or eight, Daddy brought a dog home for my brother and me. Danny is younger than I, by two and a half years. Generally, we get along very well. More than that, really. Especially considering he's a boy and I'm a girl and that my friends were always too old for him and treated him like a combination errand boy and bean bag. But when we were very small we played together on the lawn in front of our house for hours. And it was always nice because he had instinctively learned to adapt to the fact that I wasn't a boy—and vice versa. We never told tales on one another, either, which I'm told is unusual. Anyway, about Henrietta, the dog.

I remember the night my father came home with her; it was late spring and very warm. We were allowed to ride down to the station in our pajamas with Mummy and wait there for Daddy's train. He only had a short way to go but for some reason he preferred the atmosphere of the commuter train to our Buick convertible (he said he hated traffic jams on the highway but I think he liked to be steeped in the essence of masculine company, sweaty and uninhibited) and rode it every day, back and forth between our neat little exurban platform and Hartford. A few minutes after we got there the engine pulled in and several men, looking hot and tired, stepped down from the coaches and then Daddy, alert and cool, appeared, carrying a box like a small black house and he would not open it until we all got inside our front door but of course we knew what was inside because it was barking and whining and wanted so desperately to be let out to run around free.

Henrietta was a nervous, mustard-colored spaniel to whom I

became immediately and passionately attached. My mother felt somewhat uneasy about this attachment. But nevertheless I insisted that Henrietta sleep on my feet at night, eat with me, right under the table. Only I could bathe her, feed her, brush her. Danny was fond of her too, but not like a madman. He was fond of her, period.

My impression is that the more I bullied this poor beast with my devotion, the more my mother harassed me. Once she told me that if I did not stop playing with Henrietta and go outside and play with the kids on our block she would call the pound and have them come for my pet.

One afternoon I came home from school and walked in through the back door and said "Hi. Where's Henry? She didn't come to meet me." I picked up a cookie from a baking tin on the kitchen table and took a bite.

"She's down in the shed," Emmy, our cook, told me. "Your mamma put her there for the worms."

"What worms?" The cookie, sitting on my tongue, tasted suddenly like chalk.

"Henrietter, she pick up something. Your mamma's waiting to take her to the doctor."

"But why in the shed?" A kind of thunderous panic was starting up in me.

"I don't know," Emmy said, irritable. "Why don't you ask her, stead of me. I'm busy. Go ask your mamma."

"Poo," I said and ran out of the kitchen. My head was hot, as if I had a fever. I could now hear the poor dog howling and barking, way down at the end of Mother's garden.

I rushed upstairs without taking off my jacket.

"Mother!" I yelled.

"I'm here, I'm lying down, dear. Don't shout so, Nicky. I can hear you very well."

"Mother, what is my dog doing in that awful little shed?"

My mother's face hardened even before she opened her mouth. "She's sick, Nicky. She threw up all over the living-room rug and

I don't want her inside the house until she's over whatever it is she's got." My mother had not even bothered to rise up on an elbow. She lay stretched out under a satin comforter, her head on two pillows, her face freshly washed, and her thick hair tied back off her face with a black velvet ribbon. This afternoon nap was responsible for Mother's marvelously young beauty. Vanity, not fatigue, flattened her every day.

I was more angry than I had ever been, my anger gathering much more force than it needed. There was no doubt in me: I wished my mother dead. I realize that this is the kind of emotion a person is supposed to forget. I never did. I only tell this trivial story to explain that every passion I have had since—love, hate, desire, fear—has been, in a sense, an anticlimax to those murderous ten minutes. It was the dark injustice, smelling of terror and dog hair and her vomit. I wanted to comfort Henrietta but had the door suddenly opened I'm not sure I would have gone in. Because inside was terror leading to death. I knew nothing about that; I could only suspect it. And my mother was the brute that galvanized my resistance to it, the close and the dark. The dog and I were her victims, equally, and the dog's howling was a kind of frightful music.

But after all I was too afraid of my mother to show anything as destructive as a good old murderous impulse, so I simply created a scene that was distasteful for both of us and, by extension, for my father. And even for my brother Danny.

"I want to see Henrietta," I said, under some terrible control. "I demand that you let her out."

"You what?" At last my mother sat up. Her blue jersey robe swung into soft vertical folds from her shoulders and breasts. In spite of myself, I thought she looked like an angel, the massive, avenging kind. I backed away.

"I want to see my dog." This time it was a plea.

"She is not *your* dog. And no one is going to see her until I take her to Dr. Herbie."

"I'll take her. You hate her."

My mother looked stunned. I think at this point she did not know what to say to me so she told me to go to my room without supper (which I wasn't especially hungry for), she would talk to my father about my attitude, etc., etc.

I was only about eleven then, very straight and doughy, like a blond gingerbread woman. Self-conscious. I remember that once that year my aunt took me to a beauty parlor as a treat and I so loathed what they did to me that I hid in the cellar for a whole day so that none of my friends would see me, not even Molly Tempest. But, more important, I was beginning to feel that whatever my relationship to my parents, Mummy was not on my side. Which is, I suppose, the only terms a child like me could think in.

What enraged me for a long time was not so much poor Henrietta's imprisonment but Mother's nap at her expense. Alas poor dog, alas poor me.

After that (and Dr. Herbie cured Henrietta by purging her, I imagine) Mother never mentioned the incident again but I'm sure it went down in her mind on the debit side. One of Nicky's weaknesses: a hasty temper combined with unreasonableness. (Not, of course, loyalty to a pet or sympathy for others but only how I behaved with Mother.)

Well, Mother wasn't really so bad because she could sometimes, unexpectedly, be amusing and she always bought me the most beautiful clothes she could find. And she knew how to find them.

There is something else about the dog that I guess I ought to tell because it rounds out the episode.

One week end when we were away in Maine where my grandmother had a summer place, Emmy, the cook, let Henrietta run out of the house, unleashed, at night—something she had been instructed not to do. But she did it anyway because she was thoughtless or careless (literally did not care enough) and Henrietta was hit and killed by a car whose driver never even stopped. Emmy was so upset that she worried herself into a nervous collapse and when we got back early Monday morning she was lying in bed groaning and shaking. Daddy looked in through the door-

way to the maid's room and shrugged with disgust and pity. Emmy was pretty scared she was going to be fired, though God knows my mother wouldn't have fired her for that. Anyway, Daddy was terribly anxious about me. Maybe he thought I'd go into a tailspin like Emmy. So he broke the news of Henrietta's death with elaborate care and told me she died instantly and was getting old anyway and all those sops intended to soak up grief.

But he needn't have bothered. For some reason that I have never been able to understand, a week after my dog was killed I had forgotten her. She meant no more to me than the dog in the hunting print in my father's den.

II

ABOUT WHAT I think of as my doughiness. Most girls go odd around eleven. Some get very thin, others fat. It seems that becoming a woman is crucial then and it might be that, just before it happens, nature reminds girls that they are still children. I took it all very hard. I rarely talked to my mother and I think she's never wholly forgiven me for my silence.

I wanted to know about what grownups did. All of us, my friends and cousins and classmates, brooded publicly over our fantasies. We compared our physical development the way mothers compare their babies—for signs of precocity. Four or five of us would go to somebody's house after school and drink milk and eat cookies and take turns shyly disrobing in the bathroom with each other. When I think of it now, I wonder we were not embarrassed more.

My best friend was the daughter of Daddy's company's First Vice-President, Joseph Tempest. Daddy was the President. Molly was old for her age; she was the first one in our class to start bleeding every month. I envied Molly but I was scared too. But she liked me, even though I considered myself terribly unadvanced and ignorant, and we became good friends. I think Daddy did not altogether approve of Molly, but Mr. Tempest was so high up in

the Connecticut Mutual Trust Insurance Company that he, Daddy, never said anything against Molly. How could he?

Molly spent a lot of time at my house and I at hers. She loved to tell me things I had not heard of, or had only read in books. I remember that we found a book of short stories in her father's study. They were translated from the French and were by Guy de Maupassant. They were about women loved by men other than their husbands. And it had illustrations, opulent steel plates, one of a hefty woman lying naked on a flat Mediterranean roof and another of a plump milkmaid carrying two buckets of milk slopping over their sides. And others. We thought it very exciting and naughty to read the stories (we took turns reading aloud to one another). But Molly said:

"That's nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean these stories are neat to read but they're tame. They don't tell you anything, really."

"What else is there?" I asked. I squirmed against Mr. Tempest's leather couch.

"Oh, men and women do much more than just mate with each other." Mate was a word we had been taught in Hygiene at school. I'm surprised now that Molly used it; she was too sophisticated for it.

"What else is there?" I asked again.

"Well, other positions and other things they do," she said, legitimately smug.

I made her describe those other things they did and I must admit she knew all about sex. God knows from where. Surely not her mother and father, for they were as properly aloof from such talk as mine were. She had no older brothers and her only sister was younger. It wasn't in Hygiene either. She must have picked it up from the boys at school or from experience. And the last is preposterous. She was only twelve.

Well, if Molly truly knew what it was all about, I was still in a kind of Dark Ages as far as experience was concerned. Even after

most of my friends were quite cavalier about where the circle of life starts—and how—I was convinced it was *the* ultimate mystery, the permanent mystery.

I think this was partly because Daddy was so strict. I realize this does not sound strange or unusual but it seems unusual when it happens to you. For example, when most of the girls I knew were allowed to let boys take them home from parties—at fourteen or fifteen—Daddy still always called for me in the car. Only once did I consider staying home to save myself the humiliation but that, I found after a miserable evening spent listening to records with Danny and feeling sorry for myself, was worse.

My friends got used to having Daddy ring the doorbell just as things were getting good, you know: lights down and anticipation up. But I never did. I remember I exploited every last one of my tricks and charms trying to persuade my parents—chiefly Daddy—that what they were doing was unnecessary and also extremely painful for me and Daddy listened, he really did, but he went right on calling for me and keeping me from doing things other girls my age did.

My mother, I realize now, was on my side rather than on his. For once.

"Nicholas," she said, "why don't you let Nicky go on this picnic?"

"Because, May dear, they are planning all hell. Why should my daughter be involved? There will be other picnics. Nicky's too young to go off with a crowd of youngsters who will most certainly be drinking and God knows what else."

Listening in the next room I protested silently, fervently: "I'm not too young, not, not. I know about the dark and about nakedness and what's generally done and not done, though I haven't tried any of it. But you won't let me choose though you have chosen, you won't let me see though you have seen. Is what you have seen so bad, so black, that you are afraid to have me look?" The melodrama in this soliloquy did not diminish its aptness: I was truly suffering.

This picnic, as it happened, was the last party of the school year. And for me it had a special significance because my father and mother were sending me to boarding school the following September and never again would my life be so casual or so easy or straightforward. I had prophesied this and it turned out I was right.

It was a strange coincidence how my father went to Atlantic City the day before the picnic. And then how Mother started out on one of her all-day sprees (that is, shopping in the morning with a friend, a boozy, expensive lunch, movies in the afternoon, "tea" with another friend, a late, exhausted return, no supper and straight to bed). Danny was off somewhere and I was moping around the house, burning up hundreds of calories in resentment and stuffing them back via a huge bowl of cherries, when I heard some cars honking in our driveway and then Molly rushed in. I argued with her for a minute and then I said, "The heck with it, I'm coming." It was the only time in my whole life that I'd deliberately disobeyed Daddy. It was the one time I should have listened.

There were some older boys along and all of us jammed ourselves into three or four convertibles and took off into the country, heading for a lake where we could rent canoes and rowboats, past Danbury. Actually it was a state park and generally quite deserted, especially at the beginning of the season, which it was then.

You read about violence. It's always happening somewhere else, like a freak accident or a triple murder. But this time it happened to us and this violence was my earliest contact with something wild and unexpected, something that comes suddenly and leaves everyone shattered.

Well, I'm probably making it sound worse than it was but in one way it could hardly have been worse for me because I was not only its inspiration but its victim as well.

We went swimming as soon as we reached the lake, although the water was extremely cold. There was a lot of horseplay, with the boys grabbing the girls and trying to heave us into the water.

But it was still all in fun and no one got hurt or even angry. We ate sandwiches and drank beer (it was the first time for some of the girls) and then some took naps, while others—mainly boys—got into the canoes and rowboats and raced each other across the lake.

I think it was along with the beer that the kids set loose a spirit of defiance, as powerful as a genie. Many of them had been restricted for a long time. Nothing like the way I was but nevertheless they had the feeling their parents were watching them, watching for them to slip. I don't know why parents seem to think that on the one hand their children should be able to do pretty much as they please and on the other hand to require what I call sneak-watching. It is as if the parents do not quite trust their own judgment. A mother who sends her child out on his bicycle and then stands at the window just waiting for him to ride out on the street where he's been forbidden—it's the same as that.

Anyway, these kids felt free but free with a kind of meanness. That's the only word to describe it. Mean like a suicide who jumps off a building and leaves a mess on the street. They just couldn't relax.

And there I was, without really knowing it, in the middle of them, sort of the eye of a storm. And I have never been able to fully accept the fact that I had such a fantastic effect on these boys. Molly's the flirt, the open one. I mean she bats her eyes and swings her behind and the boys appreciate her: she is obvious. But I'm not that way, I've never been. That's how I got into the mess, at least that's what Molly insists: she says I lead boys on, that I dip my eyes at them and they think I mean to be wicked. They knew Molly was just kidding around but they thought I was serious.

After another swim we all decided to go to one of those road-house barns on Route 7. It had a frantic jukebox and low rafters and they sell beer to anyone with money, regardless of age, and they never seem to lose their license. Some of the kids started acting exactly like J.D.'s. A couple of the boys, Homer Little and

Charles Brookley, chinned themselves from the rafters, showing off and making a lot of noise generally until the manager came over and told them to stop acting like baboons or get the hell out. Sometimes a boy in a button-down shirt and an expensive tweed jacket thinks he can get away with anything. I guess they knew the manager meant business because they sat down but their excitement didn't go away; it just sat down with them.

And then, there was something going on between me and Charlie Brookley.

Charlie was a bully. He was also considered a Big Man. Big and handsome. He had a lot of yellow hair (when most of the other boys wore crew cuts) and very pink cheeks and enormous shoulders. The kind of gorilla that *Life* loves to show on a surfboard. What Charlie was doing was rubbing my leg under the table. And I, dope that I was, and softened with beer, was flattered.

This leg-rubbing was not harmless fun for Charlie; he never did anything harmlessly. When he played basketball he fouled until he was put out of the game and then he would run off the court giving the crowd a big show of shoulder-shrugging-plus-smile. And when he kissed a girl he meant to roll her back on her heels—especially if she seemed reluctant.

I wasn't Charlie's girl. I wasn't anybody's girl, but a rather shy boy named Lawrence Pfeiffer (I found out later from Molly, who, it seems, knew about it all along but just never got around to telling me) used to follow me around, and when he wasn't actually dogging me, Molly said, he would follow me around with his loose blue eyes. He never asked me for a date; he was scared of me, I guess, because he thought I was so pretty. But he needn't have been: I did like handsome boys but I also liked smart ones. I would have gone out with Larry any time he asked me. He used to get A-plus from Mr. Fields in Biology and no one in the history of Fairmont High School had ever done that.

Larry was at the picnic, and later at the Blue Lantern he found a seat near me. I will try to imagine what he was going

through; he was, simply, jealous over a girl he had rarely even talked to, let alone kissed, though he had sat in the same classrooms with me for years. It was a kind of classic thing, Molly suggested later, when it was too late, like Dante and Beatrice, though God knows I'm no Beatrice.

Larry must have been aware of what was going on and watching Charlie's face. Charlie never cared about keeping anything to himself. Of course, I was partly to blame, I won't try to squirm out of it, but somehow, whenever Charlie Brookley was involved with anyone, you saw only Charlie. He dominated. The more I think about him the less I like him. Anyway, Charlie was inching closer to me and Larry was apparently getting more agitated, and pretty soon Larry stood right up and walked over to Charlie and me and said,

"Charlie, I want to talk to you."

Charlie, sneering, said, "Well?"

"No. I mean outside."

At that point my head cleared and I saw something in Larry's face that scared me—not for Charlie but for Larry. So I asked Charlie not to go. Which clinched it: Charlie bounced up on his muscular legs and got out first.

There are two accounts of what followed and since, as I've already told you, I'm not at all partial to Charlie Brookley, I won't give you his. And I won't give you Larry's either because he was too shattered to be able to see the truth. I'll have to give you mine.

The two boys went off in Charlie's car. It was a new red convertible, a seventeenth birthday present from Charlie's father. They must either have been arguing or silent. There was no love lost between them. They drove back to the lake and got out of the car, leaving the engine running.

I think Larry probably meant to talk Charlie into a kind of submission (Larry had been drinking beer too, and it swelled his confidence) and, if that didn't work, he would try something else, maybe beat Charlie up or push him into the water. Now this was absurd, of course, since Charlie was about twice Larry's weight

and very strong, and mean, as I've said. Charlie must have enjoyed leading Larry on, perfectly sure that if anything happened to anyone it would not be to him, Charles Avery Brookley, Jr.; he, on his side, was half drunk and terribly cock-sure. This little episode would be good for the locker-room later: it would be known as the night Lawrence Pfeiffer discovered his balls. In other words, a Big Joke.

The two boys must have walked right down to the edge of the lake because Larry, when he got back, was wet to the waist. I can just see Charlie giving his puny friend a shove with the heel of his hammy hand and Larry, tripping backwards and then, by some unexplainably good fortune, finding his source of balance again.

They both admit that they argued but it was more a double-sided attack than a fight over Nicky Hapgood. Charlie undoubtedly strung out curse words and tossed them at Larry, who reacted by getting intellectual and telling Charlie what he thought of his type (which he despised. Maybe he was right and maybe not but Larry and Charlie could never in a million years talk with each other and understand).

In any case, Larry managed to get into Charlie's car. Maybe all the beer that Charlie had swallowed caught up with him suddenly and made him dizzy. All Larry had to do was step on the accelerator. And then he hit Charlie.

Charlie Brookley lost his left leg right above the knee, and three fingers from his left hand and one side of his face was stiffened into a permanent grimace, even after a couple of plastic operations. He was smashed up against a tree; it was called an accident.

When he drove back, afterwards, to the Blue Lantern, Larry was crying and you couldn't understand what he was trying to say. Poor Charlie was still there by the lake, with his leg hanging on by a string. A few of the boys, when they finally understood Larry, drove out and found Charlie, and Homer Little threw up when he saw him. Charlie was not quite unconscious and moan-

ing and it was ages before the ambulance arrived (the first thing the doctor did was give Charlie a huge shot of morphine). Charlie was in the hospital for two months and then in bed at home for two more and then the doctors gave him an artificial leg with a shiny brown shoe attached.

I wanted to tell my mother about being there at the picnic so she wouldn't have to hear from someone else. (It never did occur to me to lie and say I hadn't been there.) The accident was the biggest thing that had happened to Fairmont in years and it made the headlines of all the local papers and some in New York even. I knew Daddy would read about it and I could just imagine his satisfaction that his wisdom (in not allowing me to go on the picnic) had been vindicated so dramatically. So the first chance I had I told Mummy I had been along, though naturally I minimized my role—and begged her to let me be the one to tell Daddy. Not only did she refuse, but she pounced on my father the minute he stepped into the house and took him into his den and I went upstairs, mortified and cowardly.

I must say Daddy didn't give her much time; after only about five minutes Daddy's voice, more bewildered than angry, called me down.

By the time I reached the foot of the stairs there was a strange man standing with Daddy, rotating his hat in his fingers. "This is Detective Green," said Daddy, and we all went into the den and sat down together. I shot one last fearful look at my mother, clasped my hands together, and stared into my lap. I felt like St. Joan or somebody.

The detective started off: "Mr. Hapgood, I regret having to disturb you today but my chief wanted me to come down and try to fill in a few details about the Brookley accident, which he feels Miss Hapgood here can supply us with. It will only take a few minutes, sir." Detective Green was being awfully polite to Daddy.

"My daughter Nicky will be delighted to help you," said Daddy. I nearly died with relief: he sounded on my side.

It seemed the police were really investigating the accident,

talking to everyone who was on the picnic, trying to stitch together some coherent account. Somebody had told them that it was Nicky Hapgood who had been sitting with Charlie before he left with Larry, that she would probably know something, if anybody did. So for ten minutes Detective Green of the Connecticut police shot questions at me, like: What were they talking about? Why didn't they like each other? What led up to their quick exit? Did I think it was an accident?

"Of course it was an accident," I snapped. "What else could it be? You don't think that Lawrence Pfeiffer would run over anyone on purpose, do you?" I think I sort of shouted at the policeman.

"That's what I'm trying to find out from you," the man said, insinuating, leading, I sensed, to something very unpleasant. He made me sound like an accessory or something.

"Nicky," my father said, "there's no call to get angry. Detective Green is simply attempting to get the complete story for his official records and he needs your help." He turned to Detective Green. "This has been a terrible experience for my daughter—I think you can understand that—and I believe she's told you all she knows. Can we wind this up now?"

Though clearly unsatisfied, Detective Green gave in to Daddy; almost everybody does.

After the investigator left, still carrying his hat, Daddy said he wanted to talk to me. I could hardly have expected anything less. And Mother, giving in at last to her panic, supplied the chorus: "This is dreadful; what a frightful thing; my own daughter; what can I think?" repeated with more or less hysterical monotony until even Daddy told her, in a nice way of course, to shut up.

Daddy seemed terribly hurt that I'd disobeyed him and told me that my trust was no longer sacred (you can imagine how great *that* made me feel) but his main concern was for me, what this had done to me.

"You've been involved in the kind of thing your mother and I have tried to hold off from you: violence and yes, tragedy." He

paused to let this sink in and looked into my eyes, dreadfully. "What happened to the Brookley boy was a tragedy; he will never recover. And it is a tragedy, too, because the parents of these children haven't been able, nor have we, I fear, to educate them for life."

"Yes, Daddy."

"I hope, Nicky, that you have learned something through this experience. I hope with all my heart that you will recover." Daddy fished out his handkerchief and rubbed it through his hair. I had no idea he would take it so hard. He seemed to think that something in me was in jeopardy.

Mother said: "She may recover; I never will." Which was awfully melodramatic of her, I thought.

Daddy ignored her remark. "We want you to know that although you have disobeyed us we feel there is no punishment we can give you equal to what you have already suffered and so, as a token, your mother and I have decided"—(which was just his way of bringing Mother into it because he could not possibly have had a chance to "decide" anything with her)—"to withhold a dollar a week from your allowance for the next three months."

"You realize," said Mummy, "that you are getting off unbelievably easy."

"The punishment," my father said to me, "is tangible. What I would really like is for you to spend a lot of time thinking about the effects of irresponsible behavior."

"Oh, Daddy," I choked, "it wasn't my fault."

"No one is suggesting that you were to blame for what happened. You must believe that."

"Then why do I feel so horrible, so guilty?" And my tears came in a flood.

"That, my dear, is what I want you to consider."

I discovered that after a few days I could *not* think about anything connected with the accident, at least not without feeling sick to my stomach. So I tried, simply, to forget it: it was hard.

As for Charlie, the accident hardly changed him at all; he went

on being the same kind of stinker he always had been. Only you were obliged to feel sorry for him too.

Well, that was a weird good-by to public school and it left me feeling strange about kids I'd known all my life; and still, deep down, wondering what I'd done that had caused so much trouble.

And also feeling strange about sex because, to listen to my folks, if they talked about it at all, it was always a psalm about "when two people love each other very much, dear, they get married and have sexual intercourse and have children, etc., etc.," all very nice and pretty but never any mention made about how sex can make things or people ugly like, for instance, Charlie Brookley, who is dirty-minded. And I forgot to mention that in addition to this sweetness-and-light lecture that Danny and I had to listen to whenever the spirit hit Mother, I always had the distinct impression, as a child, that it wasn't all so sweet and light with my parents in that area. Naturally, you can see why I was confused.

III

JUST BEFORE I LEFT for boarding school my face and hands broke out in a gorgeous rash and Mummy responded magnificently; she started shopping around for a doctor who could fix me up before I went away to Buttercup Hall. First we tried Hartford, then New Haven, and finally ended up in New York at one of those medical center cities. It was there that I met my favorite doctor of all time. His name was Walsh Rosenberry. I've never seen my mother madder at anybody.

We only waited fifteen minutes in Dr. Rosenberry's waiting room. There were other patients whispering to each other and a pile of old magazines. Mother calmly read an issue of *Vogue* she must have read at the hairdresser and I perspired with anger and impatience and good old New York City heat. This was just another chamber of horrors; I'd been here before.

Finally the nurse said we could go in to Dr. Rosenberry's office. He was sitting at a large desk, and smiled at us with the openest expression I'd ever seen on a doctor's face (and that's an awful lot of faces). He talked to me for a while and I remember that he was really very tactful when he stopped Mother from answering questions he had asked me. I felt he was on my side. Then he took us into his examining room. He asked me to sit

on a little steel stool and he sat down on another one and came very close to me and probed my face with a bright magnifying flashlight. He touched my cheeks gently, sat silent for a moment, and then asked my mother, "Has Nicky ever had this rash before? As a baby, perhaps?"

Mother looked serious and thought back over those sixteen years and said, "Why yes, now that I think of it, she had something very similar when she was about three."

And then Doctor Rosenberry, with a small, confidential smile, his hands sliding back and forth from hips to knees, said, "Well, I'm afraid she's got it again." Which just goes to show how little skin doctors know. But Dr. Rosenberry was the only one I ever met who admitted it.

I smiled shyly at Dr. Rosenberry but Mummy was so angry she turned red. She hustled me out of the office without saying good-bye or thank you. After that experience she started back in Hartford again; we went to the same doctor I'd been seeing for years and he couldn't do anything about the rash either. I know Mummy and Daddy spent a lot of money trying to have the rash cleared up. However, it disappeared spontaneously a few weeks after I'd been embedded in Buttercup Hall. Mother can't leave anything alone.

Now, about Daddy's reasons for taking me out of public school and sending me to boarding school. Both the ones he talked about and the ones he never mentioned.

"I think Nicky ought to get to know some girls from other parts of the country, May," he said to my mother one night at dinner.

Mother looked at him, vague but mildly interested. "Oh?" she said.

"Yes, indeed. I've given this a great deal of thought. Connecticut has a first-rate educational system and all Nicky's friends are splendid children, from fine homes. But she ought to broaden her outlook. I think you all understand what I'm getting at."

If my mother was not surprised (and I really couldn't tell because when Daddy talks like this she always looks at him as if

he were her minister or something), I was. Daddy didn't give a hoot, as far as I knew, about virgin experience. The men he played golf with on week ends were the same men he ate lunch with at his club and had roomed down the hall from in New Haven and had probably played baseball with before that. Even like Mother: Mummy and Daddy lived two blocks away from each other as children. And she was his date at the Junior Prom.

Now, out of a blue sky: broaden Nicky's outlook. Well, I looked at Danny, who is much smarter and much cooler than I am, and he caught my message and we both sat silent over our stewed fruit.

What Daddy meant, I realize now, was: it will be useful for Nicky to meet other girls whose fathers are rich and powerful.

Mother, who had not said anything, turned her gray eyes on me and asked, "Would you like that, dear?"

"I don't know. How can I tell?"

"Of course she'll like it." Daddy said, "Boarding school is hard work, lots of hard work but it can be rewarding as hell, if you put enough into it. Many of the best teachers in the country want to teach there." He got up. "We all finished?" He looked around the table. "Fine. Then let's go into the living room. Danny, you come too, young fellow." We all followed Daddy into the next room and arranged ourselves in chairs.

When Daddy was comfortable and had lighted one of his pipes, he said, "Nicky's getting A's fairly consistently at Fairmont, aren't you, honey?"

"Yes, Daddy, mostly. Not in Geometry, though."

"Well," he continued, preparing for the kicker, "I think she ought to find greater challenge in her schoolwork, perhaps get a few B's for a change."

I gulped. Of all the approaches, this was the least expected. Daddy had always been proudly demonstrative of my grades. I mean he even used to pass my report cards around to visitors, as if they were family snapshots. I looked at Danny again. This time it had sunk in that Daddy meant business and my brother's face was

not exactly happy. I was surprised that Danny was sad at the idea of my leaving home and that made me feel good. But none of my other emotions were so simple. Boarding school was a mystery and I was afraid of mysteries. Naturally I had known girls who had left Fairmont for Westover and Ethel Walker and so on, but I had never talked with them about it. So that what I imagined, namely, that these institutions were academically and socially rigid, and at the same time were a kind of sickly fun because they clapped girls together like the ingredients of sandwiches for an enormous picnic, was essentially true—only I didn't know it. I was, understandably, reluctant. But my father was all enthusiasm. He wanted me to go for the contacts I would make. He's always been absorbed in exclusiveness; he says it's one of the bulwarks of democracy—the one that everybody forgets about. Mother said it would be easy to get into a good college from a good boarding school. But they forgot about that later when they decided I should go to a junior college.

So I gave up my reluctance and Mother and Daddy got a million catalogues and talked to friends and finally decided on Buttercup Hall. Mummy took me downtown to Welthy's department store and bought me a set of matched luggage with two of my initials, A.H., stamped on them in gold and two wool skirts and four sweaters (two cashmeres and two Shetlands) and a ski suit with a marvelous red hood and a linen blouse for my gray flannel suit and a red leather purse because my old one was getting ratty-looking and I was all set, all shiny, all expectant, and all scared. Daddy came with me.

People are very nice to you when you walk into a strange place. For a little while it seems as if you were the guest of honor. They come close to you and say things softly and smile a lot and some of them call you dear. It must have been the same for the other girls who were just starting at Buttercup Hall too. But it made me feel I didn't quite know where I was or as if I couldn't get out if I wanted to—which is absurd because this institution was a school, not a jail, and had I really wanted to I could have left any time.

Daddy was finally ready to go, after depositing my bags and inspecting the place (he'd seen plenty of pictures but that's not the same thing). It made me want to cry when he put on his hat. (Actually I did cry a little in the bathroom where I was supposed to be combing my hair or something, just before he left.) He was standing around, near other awkward parents, all of them trying to appear casual and not sad at leaving their daughters (maybe some of them weren't so sad, after all. But Daddy was, I know. He's always been very protective towards me).

"Now you be sure and let me know, Miss Pheringill, if Nicky's work falls below your excellent standards," Daddy said to the headmistress as he shook her hand.

"I'm certain that won't be at all necessary, Mr. Hapgood. Nicky's fine record just about guarantees that. We'll do our best to maintain the record, won't we, Nicky?" And Miss Pee, as I soon learned she was called behind our doors, put a skinny arm across my shoulders and squeezed. Then she stared proudly at my father, who backed down the school driveway and into our car.

I inhaled deeply and bravely and walked upstairs to meet my roommate.

At Buttercup Hall they try to put a new girl with an old one. They put me with a junior named Florence Goldwater. She came from St. Louis where her father had made a killing in beer bottles. I remember one time Florence's mother came to visit her wearing a blond mink coat large enough for Jack Dempsey and a diamond on her finger not quite as big as the Ritz. The funny thing was Florence didn't even think about money or what is archly called "appearances." She was just plain sloppy and she did not take a bath very often and I must admit that, although she was always at the top of her class, I sometimes found myself, at the beginning, so disgusted that I had to look at something else when I talked to her.

But I'll tell you what she did, tacitly, and probably without even thinking about it: she made me realize that you can be perfectly nice and smart and popular (which she was) and still

be what some people would call a slob, that is, not brush your teeth twice a day, or not wear clean socks without holes, or have spots on your camel's hair coat. I admit it was a revelation. According to my mother, if any of those things pertained to you, you were automatically undesirable and Florence managed all of them—and more that I will go into later.

Florence was part Jewish—or, as she said, “on my grandparents’ side.”

Florence taught me a lot about life at Buttercup Hall. If it seemed especially significant for “my story” (I’m beginning to sound like some sort of cheap heroine with a moral for all the girls and God knows I’m not *that*) I’d tell you about it all because the inside of a female seminary, as my brother Danny calls B.H., can be pretty fascinating to an outsider. But I’m trying to keep this short and pertinent so I’ll only describe the things that seem to have some meaning for me.

The first thing I ought to mention is the constant absorption in Sex. Some people have the impression that only boys talk about it but that is about as far from the truth as Jane Russell is from the stage of the Abbey Theatre. Molly Tempest was a novice compared to the girls at Buttercup Hall; they could have supplied the contents of a sexual encyclopedia. Marcia Englander insisted that she had been a researcher for Kinsey but no one really believed her: she was much too young. It was an odd kind of talk for 99 per cent of it, I suspect now, was speculation. We would sit on the floor and beds and chairs wearing pajamas and bathrobes, the semi-dark of our concession to “lights-out” increasing our excitement, and discuss the human body and its complexities and potentials. It was not a harmful thing, I suppose, because it made sex a familiar notion, something to sidle up to rather than flee from.

And then, of course, there was the testing of the theories.

My opportunity came early during my first year at Buttercup Hall. I was invited to a football game and dance at one of the

big boys' prep schools by the roommate of Marcia Englander's date (if you can follow that). I was very excited at the idea of going. Someone else's roommate asked Florence but she wouldn't go; she told me she'd been stuck too many times that way. So I went without her.

On the train going over Marcia tried to prepare me. The neat trick, on Saturday, she said, was to escape from the masters and the eyes peering from behind the ivy—and neck. To me, it sounded rather frenzied but I thought I was ready for anything.

The boy who met me at the train was named Arthur Tenfish and he was terribly handsome, with features so smooth and regular that one side of his face exactly matched the other. Almost like a mask. I noticed especially a bright green scarf he had wrapped around his neck a couple of times and then flung back over his shoulder; it gave him an air of dash, it made him more manly than the other boys who so conspicuously wore the school colors. Oh goodness, I thought, he'll find me awful, he'll be disappointed. But then, I'm always forgetting that I'm pretty.

We were very formal: we shook hands and said, "How do you do?" and then, shyly, like kids on their first day of school, we piled into the school bus and didn't say a word while the bus took us to a place which seemed to be located nowhere. The sky appeared to be coming down on top of us, lowering and lowering like a huge gray tent slowly falling into itself. We were on the bus about fifteen minutes, I think, before we started up a hill, neat and landscaped, and then we were at the school. Abruptly, my apprehension turned to excitement. This was my first brush with unsupervised freedom: my father, because he was removed and thus out of touch with possibilities, had given his permission, officially, and in writing, to Miss Pee for my week end. (Week end! When you are at school you discover that the week end has shrunk to twenty-eight hours: from twelve on Saturday till four on Sunday.) I imagine Daddy figured we would be carefully chaperoned. Well, we were but he obviously had not gambled

on the resourcefulness of girls and boys deprived of each other's company just when they need it the most.

Arthur Tenfish was one of those curious people who, when they are talking to you, are thinking of something else. You can't accuse them of rudeness because that's not it. What I mean is there was something behind his eyes that I could not see.

However, there was one thing he did not choose to hide from me, namely, that if he was going to go to the trouble of inviting a girl for the big fall week end, he expected something in return, she was going to have to thank him properly. How young men start thinking that a woman owes them for their ordinary politeness! It was not from my parents that I've discovered the simple, distasteful facts of life like this and about what to expect from people—they only told me about the world as they thought it *ought* to be. And they still think they prepared me for everything!

About the week end. Saturday afternoon, as I said, was devoted to admiring the prowess of the two opposed football teams. I couldn't keep my eye on the ball. Art spoke very little but snuggled close to me, half flirt and half little boy—very disarming behavior. Once every so often he'd put his cheek so near mine that I could feel his heat. He was insinuating but there was nothing I could actually tell him to stop doing. I was so dumb!

He called me, I remember with irritation even now, "little girl." I guess it was rather appropriate. "How do you like our brand of rugger, little girl?"

"Rugger?" I said. "Is that what you call it here?"

He laughed. At me. Then he placed a mittened hand over my ear, the one on the side away from him, and drew my head over. "You're very amusing, little girl," he said and let my head go. It snapped back because I'd been pulling away from him so hard.

And all the time I just knew he was thinking about something else.

I resented the tone he took with me but slowly it began to seem likely that he had taken it deliberately—to oblige me to

prove I was *not* a little girl, and so forth. For a boy of seventeen he really knew what it was all about. I wonder what his father was like.

I got terribly cold at the game and, when it was over and we had won, everyone suddenly started running: the players, the boys, the girls, the masters, the trees, the sky, the wind. The running was loud and breathless and hot because our frozen blood began to boil and our heads flew back and then we started yelling. We weren't running towards or away from anything, we were just running. Art grabbed my hand (I felt like Alice with the Red Queen) and we ran together in the middle of this huge herd. Marcia and her date had blurred. Art's hand was like an electrode: it shot sparks up my arm and into my head and down, way down into my belly. Running, running, I was going to catch a falling star.

As if they were wielding meat cleavers, the masters severed the boys from the girls and we were delivered, intact, to our rooms in the boarding house where girls were always put up, three to a room, six to a bathroom, on such occasions.

When I'm excited my face goes blank: the less expression, the more agitation. Marcia said, "What's the matter, Nicky, you bored or something?"

I shook my head. I was a firecracker with a lit fuse.

"Well, cheer up then for pity's sake, you look as if you were going to church instead of a dance." Marcia took a pencil out of her bag and stood up against a mirror and drew a thin black line over each eye, "You know what, Nicky, I think Art Tenfish likes you." One eye wasn't right. She erased the line with a Kleenex dipped in cold cream and started all over again.

I was slowly getting out of my suit. "Oh I don't know," I said. "I think it's just a thing with him. He's smooth." I yawned. I always yawn when I'm uneasy.

"Bored and tired," Marcia said, "you poor girl. Her first week end, the most gorgeous man on campus, and Nicky's bored already. Listen, hey, what you going to be like in five years?"

I really did not care in the least what Marcia thought was the matter with me; in any case, why should I try to explain to her? My secrets were mine. And one of them was my suspense about what Arthur Tenfish had in store for me. I suspected that he would try to kiss me and that I would let him, but I did not know what else: these were the delicious and terrifying moments before any reality, the fancied magic carpet, the draught of eternal life, the highest romance, the ultimate transformations. Art's kiss would hardly be my first but this encounter was different from any previous: my body had never before insisted that my mind be silent.

Naturally, it does not help any to say that I was awfully young and dumb about sex.

My dress was a muted red taffeta. It swished and swooshed in a way I imagined was sexy but not vulgar. When Arthur spotted me in the herd of girls shoving delicately through the gymnasium doors, a smile flicked across his face like a little whip. I was satisfied. I felt like Cinderella.

You know the way they teach you to dance in dancing school—elbows out, neat little squares on the floor, a foot, at least, between partners—we started out dancing that way but pretty soon we were so close together that we were practically on top of one another and Art's cheek seemed pasted against mine; we were both sticky with perspiration that had sprung up between us as spontaneously as our desire. Art sort of hummed the tunes that the band was grinding out and after each dance he kissed me like a butterfly and I couldn't be sure whether he meant to or whether those fragile kisses were accidents. I realize I should have played it cool but I was too naïve to react in any way but head-on.

"Little girl," Art said to me as he handed over a glass cup of sweet pink punch, "how would you like to take a little walk, have a little talk, little girl, little walk, fresh air, blue moon, let's spoon." He slid this jumble out of his word machine and stared past my eyes.

I nodded and, with an easy deliberateness, Art found and opened two heavy doors which clicked locked behind us and there we were—under the cold stars. I shivered and this boy, he was as sensitive as a cat's whiskers, noticed immediately and took off his jacket and spread it over my back. His shirt picked up the moonlight and he shone as brilliantly as a Halloween ghost. I could no longer hear the music thumping and the night was dead-still and cold. Art took my hand and I, absolutely trusting, allowed myself to be led along like a blind person. I still can't understand why this excursion seemed, at the time, so odd and so remote. After all we were only a young boy and young girl sneaking off together for a little excitement. But my God, for me there was something so stolen about those minutes, something in us so charged, that I cannot yet shake the impression that I'd stepped onto a space platform and was being flung into nowhere.

Art pulled me into a small woods or something and toward what looked like an old gazebo—very romantic. I was astonished to see two or three huddles nearby (other inhabitants of this strange no-world) but that did not in the slightest alter my sense of unreality. Gently, Art sat me down on a wooden bench inside our wooden cage and began to kiss me. I think that at first I kissed him back, all the while feeling the fuse sputtering: at any minute I would explode. Or scream. But after a few minutes I began to recognize that Arthur Tenfish was different from the other boys who had kissed me: his intensity was unapproachable and as his body grew more demanding his mind seemed to retreat until he was no longer this boy I had a date with but something horrid and frightening and I didn't like what we were doing. He was a dragon, fire-breathed and a hundred-armed, he was all around, on top, heavy, urgent, and very very strong. What he actually meant to do I don't know but (and I'm almost ashamed to admit this because it sounds foolish) I was afraid I was going to die, I was afraid he was going to smother or strangle or stab me like Jack the Ripper. Kiss me and then kill me. I remember his hands searching places where no one had ever touched me, not even a doctor,

and it seemed like ages before I had the sense to say "Stop it, stop it!" but he did not stop it, of course. (It was a hell of a time for me to say stop it.) I felt utterly trapped, doomed even—and terribly scared. I said "I'll scream" and he did not hear me. I shrieked.

He still did not hear me. I don't know what was the matter with him. I guess I yelled again because a voice called out, "For Chris'sake, pipe down. You'll get us all canned."

I called again, this time with more confidence, "Would you please come and help me?"

Something in my voice must have sounded urgent enough, for Art abruptly released me and I slipped out of his grasp and shoved away from him on the bench and sat there shaking as the other boy came up and said, "What's going on here? Hey, Tenfish, is that you?"

Arthur said yes it was him and that Nicky here had dropped her pearls and we'd needed a match but it was okay now because we found the pearls without a match.

"Okay, pal," said the other boy, "only keep it down to a dull roar, will ya? We'll all get canned if they catch us." Then he disappeared into the night again.

I was still trembling and now anger was beginning to creep into me. But some stupid compunction about not getting the others in trouble stopped me from making the fuss I ought to have made. I coughed to get rid of the tears in my throat and then calmly asked Arthur Tenfish to take me back.

"Will you won't you will you won't you, shall we join the dance?" he chanted. "You know, Miss Hapgood, I'm going to be a great painter very soon." I was astonished to hear him act as if he had not just practically raped me. But I was so anxious to get back to safety (which we accomplished by feeling our way through a damp, underground tunnel) that I couldn't really listen to what he was saying.

I think it was something about his painting. Anyway, it was about him.

The following Wednesday I received this letter:

DEAR BITSY,

Winter sits here, onerous, as white flowers on a coffin.

I think of you.

I prefer not to think of you.

You must try to unriddle why I call you Bitsy. It is not Bitsy I mean. It only sounds like Bitsy.

Some men kill and some men thrill

And some men die for a maiden.

But I prefer to paint for her

The casket she'll be laid in.

That is a poem I started for you and never finished.

Since you have cracked open this fortune cookie it is only right you should read its message: I do not especially want to hear from you but I want to tell you, Bitsy, that you should try to act more the way you appear. Do not try to deceive yourself for you cannot survive—someone will catch you out and fling you off to Kingdom Come.

MEN DO NOT CARE FOR TEASES!

MEN DO NOT CARE FOR DECEPTION!

MEN DO NOT CARE FOR ANYTHING BUT

Tits, Twats, and Yes.

yrs forever,

A. Tenfish

I was so angry at this letter that I tore it into tiny scraps and flushed them down the john. I certainly never dreamed of answering him.

IV

IT'S FUNNY HOW, when you are older (I'm going to vote in the next election), things that took place in the past suddenly assume a meaning. For example, that place we went to in Maine every summer. To me it was marvelous sailing and hiking and staying up late and all kinds of summer fun and why we went there or who really owned it simply never occurred to me. Because I was a child I was not interested. Only now, from more than ten years' distance, do I understand that it was my grandmother's place, that she, not my mother, was its "boss," that Daddy made us go there every summer even though Mummy was just dying to travel or go to Mexico or somewhere, anywhere else, and was *always* talking about taking a trip. And that all the times we were up there Mummy acted funny, subdued, because she hated living in a house run by someone else (particularly her mother-in-law). And that my grandmother Hapgood used to spoil us and give us things that Mummy disapproved of, like a playhouse ordered all the way from F. A. O. Schwarz in Boston and set up high on her hill over the sea and rocks; it must have cost at least three hundred dollars, and Mother was aghast and sure it would spoil us and maybe it did a little. But what I'm trying to say is that while all this was going on I saw nothing: nothing strained, no

strain suggested; just my own inevitable pleasure. I can only see it now.

And if I seem to understand my past better than my present, it is because of this Gestalt thing working; my present is still formless.

I was telling you about Buttercup Hall, I haven't forgotten.

If you think that a boys' military school is regimented you ought to take up residence in a girls' boarding school for a while. It was not difficult to pretend I was Jane Eyre, trapped in the orphanage with only a bowl of gruel for company. Of course I've never been inside a military school but Buttercup Hall had a whole bookful of rules (*The Parietal Yellow and White*) you were supposed to obey. Public opinion was against you from the moment you arrived. For instance, my first Sunday night at Buttercup Hall an upperclassman came into the big living room downstairs and sat on a chair and asked her "squad" to sit down on the floor around her chair for a chat. Actually what she did was read aloud from *The Parietal Yellow and White* and tell us there was a copy for each of us waiting in our desks and that we should, for the sake of a better Buttercup community, please learn the rules *by heart*, and that we would be given a *written* quiz on them the following Sunday. Oh boy. My mother had always had me make my bed and tidy up my room and so forth and I remember when I was very little she pasted gold stars on a chart, indicating if I'd brushed my teeth, performed on the toilet, put my toys and clothes away, etc., but even that system lapsed after a couple of months and soon the stars meant nothing.

Buttercup Hall was the first time the conduct of my life was determined by explicit regulations. I'll never send my daughters there.

I'm sure this is all important because the oppressive emphasis on rules made freedom seem an end in itself—what we would do with it, if we had it, kept changing from day to day and mood to mood but we dreamed of a golden freedom with the persistence of 436 Jaxons.

For example, Florence and I would sit in our room before dinner and start talking about what we would order if we could go out to eat. I know it doesn't seem very important but we wanted cheeseburgers and French fries as badly as a man lost in the desert wants water. And we knew what we were getting instead because the day's menu was posted, sadistically, each morning. It would be macaroni and cheese casserole (overcooked and gluey), a forkful of soggy salad, chiffon bread pudding (a contradiction if there ever was one), and a choice of room-temperature milk or room-temperature coffee. We were never allowed out for dinner. That was the rule: "If one or both parents or guardian visit their daughter at Buttercup they may (not more than once in one term), by applying the day before to the headmistress' office, obtain permission to escort their daughter and one or two friends off the school grounds for the evening meal, provided the girl or girls are returned before ten o'clock."

"Each Buttercup girl is expected to clean her room daily, the cleaning to consist of bed-making, dusting, general tidying, and depositing of her wastebasket outside the dormitory room. There will be a daily noon inspection by officers of the Student Council. If a room is considered to fall below Buttercup neatness standards, the girl or girls responsible for it will, at the discretion of the S.C. officers, be given a task or a demerit. Three demerits in a single term may mean suspension, after a decision of the Council's General Court has been rendered." Needless to say, the Student Council was nothing more than a puppet of the authorities.

The system of chaperonage devised by these authorities would curl your hair. It seems faintly amusing to me now as I read over the *Yellow and White*, but at the time it seemed like a chain made out of untempered steel. Nevertheless, if they imagined that with all the supervision and precautions, checks and triple checks, they had one hundred per cent control of us girls, they were either foolish or hypocrites.

And then there is another side to all this which I've been saying: Buttercup Hall attracted almost as many originals as it did

people like Daddy, prosaically in love with its fancy brochure and its fancier reputation. Poor Daddy, if he'd ever found out, he'd have had a superior fit. It was extremely distressing to me at the beginning but after a while I guess I grew philosophical: I became as tolerant of decadence as a Roman. I was also grateful to circumstances which had given me a roommate and friend like Florence.

"If you're going to survive here," she said to me one evening during our first week together and rummaging in her closet, which was unbelievably messy, "you'll take an Olympian view of the sexual goings-on around this place. I mean, you too can be seduced. Or, on the other hand, you can laugh like hell. Me, nobody wants to come too close to me, so I'm fairly safe. Here, have an olive." And, like a squirrel in a hoard of nuts, she produced a bottle of wrinkled black olives and held it out to me. Florence and I consumed a jar of these bitter things every week for the rest of that year. They were our obsession and consolation. We took turns buying them in the nearest village on Saturday mornings, our only hour and a half of liberty.

I wanted to share Florence's perspective, that is, to step up to her private window and stay there. Other girls, though, were more than tempted by teachers, peculiarly uninterested in consequences, to use sex as an entrance to college and this often invited disaster. Abandon hope, and all that. The funny thing was you would expect the openly masculine women to be the ones to watch out for, you know, the shingled hair, white-washed face, g.s.o.'s (Good Solid Oxfords), porkpie hats—what Florence called the German doctor syndrome—but these were in the minority. Miss Imogenia, for example, was virtually in disguise. She had thick, honey-colored hair, down to her shoulders, and she wore wonderful soft tweed skirts and usually a cardigan sweater with a string of pearls and very high-heeled pumps on absolutely tiny feet. She was as pretty and feminine as I always imagine Catherine, in *A Farewell to Arms*, to be.

One day Miss Imogenia kept me after class and, with the

transparent excuse of getting me to patch up my Caesar homework with her help (it *was* a mess, I admit), tried to initiate me into the glories of homosexual love. Just like that. But I neatly avoided it by telling her I had a sore throat and, I thought, a fever and would she mind if I cut our conference short and go to the infirmary. I guess I was pretty flushed. At any rate, it worked; mononucleosis was rampant at Buttercup Hall.

Miss Imogenia was not the only one. These ladies seemed to drift towards me, caught in some misguided current, and I had to keep dodging them. I do not mean to sound as if everyone else was a true Buttercup girl and only I was hearing a different drummer. Not at all. Actually, I fit in quite well and as I got used to my surroundings I blossomed like a flower planted in freshly fertilized soil: I took a while to adapt, that was all. And there was always within me a reserve of some stranger spirit that kept me from being wholeheartedly anything that anyone else was. But I tried not to let it show.

V

I WANTED to play Cleopatra in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Buttercup Hall had a very ambitious drama teacher, a lady who had failed to impress Broadway; she was just right for us. The part I wanted is a good, hefty part. You, a young girl, have to be a young girl trying to be a woman and after that a woman who is truly a woman, with little trace of the girl. Complex. Mrs. Simonson held tryouts one whole Friday, followed by a week end of suspense before the cast assignments were posted on the door of the school auditorium. I wanted the lead as badly as I'd wanted anything, ever. It was one of those times when you feel as if this were final: you can see nothing beyond, just the prize staring you in the face like some enormous, teasing animal. I was certain Brenda Bond was going to get Cleopatra—she read with real audacity—and Friday night when I saw Brenda sitting opposite me at supper, after we'd both tried out, I could not swallow my food: it all went into a burning lump at the back of my throat and stalled there. I had to excuse myself from the table and go to the bathroom and spit it out into the john.

The first night, Friday, the suspense was almost a physical pain. I lay under the covers in my bed, across the room from Florence, who snored with a maddeningly irregular tempo so that I found

myself holding my breath until I heard her inhale or wheeze out, as the case was. I tried to think of *anything* but the play, but of course I had memorized the entire part and lines from it kept interrupting me like the taste of pickles or something; I ached all over in a way I hoped I would one day ache only for a man.

So first I would be speaking to Caesar or Phatatatita and then I would be holding my breath with Florence and then I would be able, for a moment, to concentrate on counting—not sheep—but just numbers, which is the only way I know to beat insomnia.

Now you may think that I'm being extravagant in reviewing these adolescent yearnings because their triviality might weaken instead of strengthen whatever pattern there is in the small flights that led up to my final, major one and my turning from Bradley and my family. But you see, my life, before it suddenly went wild and wrong, was hardly more than one insignificant incident followed by another: in fact, circumstances and people that surround any girl. But somehow the trivial always seemed to me tremendous, and where other girls might have laughed or cried or shrugged I always hid the symptoms of my distress and suffered alone. Like this wallowing in the swamp of my own suspense. What did it matter, really, if I played Cleopatra for two nights in front of the students and faculty of Buttercup Hall? Would it make any difference years later or change my life at all? Would it?

I got the part. When I saw my name

Cleopatra

ANTOINETTE B. HAPGOOD

I was so relieved I literally swooned back against the girl standing behind me. Then I walked away, grim-faced and exulting.

The world to me was once a place where ultimates were attainable and disaster was just around the corner.

Did you ever try to count rapidly to ten inside your head? I always stumble over seven or eight, I don't know why.

Shouldn't it be a fairly simple matter to go along over your own years and land where you ought to land, without stumbling?

Especially with people trying to help you. Daddy and Mummy always helped me, scouting for trouble and then eradicating it before I saw it. Being careful for me. Daddy checking on my homework and talking to my boy friends and sending me new five dollar bills at school. And Mother showing me how to fix my hair and how to dress like a lady and sending me cookies at school, from Schrafft's. And my darling brother Danny playing with me and then asking me to help *him* with *his* homework (which is a kind of compliment to me) and later writing me funny letters when I was stuck away at school feeling lonely and missing him.

More than anything I want to keep blame away from my family. I know the natural impulse is to indict the parents for the child's folly but in my case I don't think that is entirely fair. I know they were terribly humiliated after what finally happened but they didn't come down on me until it was all over. And it must have been extremely difficult for Daddy.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It seemed to me that I was at Buttercup Hall for a long, long time. We were sort of preserved like Japanese Bonsai trees, undersized and fully developed, but not permitted to grow.

You were an American or a young lady or a White or a Yellow (which meant that every time you won some sort of award you added another point onto your team's score and every time you were given a demerit you subtracted one, and at the end of each year Miss Pee totted the scores up on a huge blackboard at the penultimate assembly, and the victorious team was victorious) or an honor student or a member of the more "fortunate" class and thus responsible for those not so "fortunate" but always and always a Buttercup Girl. (Hooray!)

Maybe I didn't always want to be always and always a Buttercup Girl. Maybe I just wanted to be Nicky Hapgood (my mother was the one who named me Antoinette but it's too much name for me; I prefer Nicky) and uncover what she was supposed to be up to and not worry about trying to personify the perfect But-

tercup for Miss Pee's gratification. Florence and I would talk about this problem endlessly.

"I think it's like this, Nicky," Florence said to me from across the room one night. It was late and black and rain whispered across our window, early spring drenching rain. "If you're a Negro, say, just for a minute try to put yourself in one's place, you're black or brown or even what they call 'high yaller' but you're still, for all intents and purposes, a Negro. Right?"

"Right," I said.

"Well, okay," she went on, "you'll always know what you are. I mean all you have to do is look in the mirror. Like the world knows and you do too."

"Hey, Florence," I said, "do you know that joke about where one man says to another would you want your sister to marry a Negro and the other man says I don't have a Negro?" I started to giggle.

"Please," Florence said, "I'm trying to be serious. That's very funny but I heard it already. In fact I told it to you."

"I'm sorry, please continue."

"I was saying," Florence said, "that a Negro's stigma is immediately apparent."

"Yes," I interrupted, "but suppose the Negro only has one leg. Then he's a Negro and he's also a cripple. Which is he, a Negro or a cripple?"

"Let's not go into that part yet; I'll be coming to that complication in a minute. Now," Florence said, "let's suppose you are a Jewish person."

"Do I have to?" I asked, trying to be funny.

"Please be serious or you'll make me forget what I was going to say."

"Okay." I really did want to hear about it.

"Now being Jewish is not so easy because people don't always recognize Jews as Jews. A lot of Jewish people look even as you or I."

"You mean like Mrs. Simonsen?"

"Exactly," Florence said. "Now I happen to know, because I had a cup of tea with her one day in her room, that time she gave me special help in speech, that Mrs. S. doesn't practice her religion any more. In fact, I don't think she ever did."

"She told you that?" I asked, admiring her scope.

"Not in so many words but she didn't have to because I understood what she meant. She meant that if it had been up to her she would have chosen something else to be."

"Who wouldn't?" I said.

"A lot of people wouldn't," Florence said sharply. Actually I wasn't as bigoted as I sounded, I was only trying to be clever but it didn't work. "Besides, that's not the point," Florence went on. "What I'm saying is that for Mrs. Simonsen it's especially hard because she doesn't consider herself strictly Jewish because she's an agnostic and she certainly doesn't look Jewish and we all know that you can't split the Jews off from the rest of the human species because Jewish is a religion not a race so there you have Mrs. S. being something simply because other people think she is—after they find out she is. It's all what's foisted on her from the outside, not an inner conviction, like Zen or something."

"You mean all Negroes can accept the fact that they're Negroes but not all Jews can accept the fact that they're Jewish?"

"Yes, that's what I mean." Florence sounded pleased with me; I guess she didn't expect too much of my mind.

"Okay," I challenged, "but what's that got to do with me?"

"It has this: what are you? Are you sweet little Buttercup as Miss Pee sees you, or are you Nicky Hapgood, the light of Broadway as you do (in a couple of years), or are you just a crazy kid as your mother does?"

"Sort of like the cripple-Negro, yes?" I said.

"Yes, honey," she answered. "Now shut yo mouth, hang up your wooden leg, and go to sleep. I'm tired." I heard her making going-to-sleep noises with her blankets and pillow.

That Florence could fall asleep so quickly continued to irritate me. While still a child I had come to accept the fact that there

would be an hour blocking, like some great slippery wall, my access to sleep. Most things are hard for me--though more than anything I want them to appear easy--and even sleep, which ought to drift over you like a gentle cloud, has to roll uphill to reach me. So I learned early to use my insomniac hour for thinking or planning or remembering. I won't try to sound noble and say that I've attempted to solve the world's problems because you are, in a curious way, your own lover, lying under the covers in dark intimacy with yourself, and thus terribly self-ish. This night, after Florence spelled out C-A-T for me the hour extended itself and I suffered while waiting for sleep, turning and sighing and punching my pillow.

The image of the poor black legless cripple kept intruding itself behind my eyes and I had to make a scene in a play for it. There he is scurrying home at night after a hard day of begging and selling pencils on the streets of the unfriendly city, coming home to five motherless children (naturally his wife died of consumption or malnutrition), turning his pockets inside out for them, and shaking his woolly head (all this grotesque and exaggerated because it is silent like an old movie), then putting five potatoes on top of a tiny electric burner and, after the children have eaten, bedding them on the floor under a single army blanket. Then lying down on the floor himself, his pillow the crutches, lying down and thinking about what he is: a Negro or a cripple?

And then I worked myself into a superior misery and thought how much better life was for even a dog and I felt extremely sorry for me--for me who had nothing to be sorry about: I had everything. And the letter I'd gotten from my mother that morning, scolding me for being thoughtless and spoiled because I hadn't thanked my Great Aunt Stephanie for her lovely birthday present (I think it was a scarf with poodles), swam onto my horizon and off again like a man-eating fish. My mother never praised me if I had done something well but instead said something about it's being the least we expect of you, dear, and likewise she never neglected to mention it if I forgot something or was

sloppy. I think it was Mummy's letter which started my talking to Flo about who I was because I saw myself so irrevocably one way and my mother so decidedly another.

I might, literally, have been two different girls. And later, for three awful days, I think I was.

VI

IF NOT EXACTLY an albatross, my mother was at least a tight collar around my neck all the time I was at Buttercup Hall. She was a steady, circumspect snoop. For instance, she wrote to Miss Pee for a special report on my health at the end of each term; she never believed my letters, apparently, although I reassured her often that I was eating properly, getting to bed before midnight, washing my hair once a week, taking my vitamins, even, so help me, menstruating regularly. The one time I got something bad enough to put me in bed, she hurried over to school to see for herself just how bad that was.

Ten of us at Buttercup Hall had been stricken by what was known as The Green Death, a modest term for a nasty digestive disorder said to be transmitted by dirty forks; it was uncomfortable, hideous, exhausting—but not in any sense serious; no worse, as they say, than a bad cold. We unhappy ten were jammed into the infirmary equipped for six and in other circumstances we might have considered this overcrowding a lark but now we simply wanted peace in which to throw up. The first thing they did to you was greet you with “Ha! Another one!”, throw you down and administer an enema, intended, I imagine, to rid you of this God-awful evil, but it only made you as limp as you were

resentful of their tactics. There wasn't enough of anything to go around, not bedside tables, basins, or chairs—and you had to bring your own blanket and pillow with you. I remember having to get up on my knees in order to reach my pitcher of water sitting warmly, catching dust above me on the window sill.

Miss Wheeler, our nurse, had just made my bed the second morning and I lay back, worn out by her effort and wanting nothing more than to be eradicated, when in through the door walked my mother. I wasn't prepared; maybe I could have taken it better if she had warned me. I was terribly angry. No one else's mother came. I mean it wasn't as if we had meningitis or something like that.

I never had any control over Mother; a true zealot, she barged ahead on her missions as one possessed. And she would become so absorbed that when, for example, the abstraction "Nicky's health" met the flesh-and-blood Nicky lying there in misery, Mother was stunned; she was speechless.

"Daddy sends love," she said finally after looking at me, sitting down on my bed, taking off her long gloves, smoothing the hairs on the back of her neck, feeling her pearls, tasting her teeth.

"That's nice," I acknowledged.

"I can't stay too long, dear. Daddy thought I ought not to have come at all; he said you were in good hands, but I know what these school doctors are like." *Then* Mother decided to look around to see if Dr. Stoneham was there. She stroked her gloves in her lap and quivered her nose at the smell, which I admit was pretty strong. Like an ether factory.

"Dr. Stoneham's okay," I said. That was about all I could get through my teeth, which were clamped against the rising nausea.

"She's not giving you any strange drugs, is she?"

"They gave us some little blue capsules last night," I said. "I don't know what they are but I'm not dead yet so I guess they're just a *little* bit strange." I was being very snotty. At that moment Miss Wheeler whispered by and handed me a tiny paper cup with a blue capsule in it. I asked her to put it on my window sill.

"I'll put it there for you but don't forget to take it, Antoinette; it will have you feeling better in a shake. How do you do, Mrs. Hapgood? Please excuse me; as you see I have a lot to do here." And she smiled the masochistic smile of the selfless and handed a Dixie-Cup-with-pill to my neighbor.

Mother looked at her suspiciously but miraculously said nothing. Maybe she was saving it up.

"Blah!" I said, trying to shut out everything and turning over on my stomach.

"You poor thing. I was thinking of asking Dr. Marshall to come and see you."

I sat up again. "Mother, for goodness sake don't get Dr. Marshall. I'm perfectly okay. This thing . . . Oh, what's the use? *No Dr. Marshall!*"

"Well," she went on, ignoring my protest, "we'll see how you are this evening. If you're not better, he's coming to take a look at you."

"Jesus," I mumbled to myself. "What's Daddy doing?" I thought if we talked about something else maybe she'd forget. Besides, I was hurt. If one of them had to come, why couldn't it have been Daddy instead of Mummy? I wanted to see him more than her.

"Oh, the usual emergency meetings and conferences though heaven knows the company's doing fine." She talked as if the very idea of Daddy's success made her weary. "But he did have time last week to get me this." She slithered her left arm out towards me and I saw a beautiful gold chain around her wrist. "Your Daddy's still quite a charmer," she said, squeezing her prize with her right hand. "He told me it was for keeping his socks darned or some similar nonsense. He should be selling snake oil instead of insurance. I guess the trouble with me is I like snake oil." She looked at the bracelet again as if expecting it to give her some answers. "Is it worth it?" she asked it. She actually held the darn thing to her ear and when nothing came out, not even a whisper, she rang down the curtain on that act.

"Now," she said, in an entirely different manner, a mother-manner.

"Yes, Mother. Now?"

"Daddy and I, especially Daddy, were wondering if you were meeting any nice boys while you're here. Have you been having a good time, Nicky?"

"I just love to vomit," I told her, snotty again.

Mother tried hard not to lose her patience. "You know I don't mean that. *Before* you got sick."

"Pretty good, I guess."

"You're such a pretty girl, Nicky, you know you have to be careful with boys."

"Is Daddy worried?"

"Of course not, Nicky, what a silly question. We just felt you ought to be reminded again of . . . well, of how we expect you to behave."

"I know, Mother. Listen Mother, they don't let you out of their sight long enough for anything to even get started. My God, they even have glass panels on the john doors so they can peek to make sure you're not smoking. Honestly, sometimes they act as if you let a boy *look* at you you'll get knocked up." I was getting pretty p.o.'d now and it wasn't good for my alimentary canal. Emmy Winston and Ann Goodhart were listening from their beds next to mine and smirking at each other. I put my hands, in a dramatic gesture, over my eyes.

"You're tired, poor baby," Mother said in a tone which might possibly indicate a retreat, but I was too worked up to take advantage of it.

"I'm not tired," I cried. "I just don't feel very good and you're acting as if you think all we do here is lie in wait for a boy to appear and then we jump on top of him."

"Nicky," Mother said, softly this time so that no one would hear, "I can see you are in no mood to talk reasonably or adultly. Now I'm going to ask you to do something for me. I'm going to ask you to write a nice long letter to Daddy and tell him what

you've been doing. It will please him very much. Is that a bargain, Nicky?"

"A bargain?" I almost shrieked. "What's the bargain, what do I get out of it?" I knew what she meant, she was a master of the circuitous. She meant if I could assure Daddy the prison walls at Buttercup Hall were still impregnable then she wouldn't tell him how rude, how crude, how proficient in a vile idiom I'd been. Oh God, it was all so tiresome.

I think there is some beauty in misery. Please do not misunderstand: my life was not truly miserable. It is simply that given a moment of unhappiness I am able to extrapolate it into despair. And if I was dissatisfied in some vague way (and it was vague, for I can't cite much concrete in evidence) with my life at Buttercup Hall, I could make myself absolutely gorgeous with misery.

I suffered through well-bred stasis, through elegant provincialism, through refined decadence. And I fear that if I hadn't been miserable I would have been much worse off: I would have been bored.

On reflection I find that there are shards I have not properly examined for you, bits of my life at Buttercup Hall that made me, for the first time, just a little skeptical; in a sense permitted me to glimpse the ugly underside of people I already thought I knew pretty well.

But the glimpses and the tinge of skepticism were not enough to teach me what I ought to have known about people, and not enough, in the end, from almost ruining my life. I said that as I got accustomed to the Buttercup regime I "improved": my marks were higher, I had more friends, I was the star in just about every play the drama club produced. I was one of the insiders.

During my junior year at B.H. I started dating boys from Yale and Dartmouth and other places. Dating is a euphemism for what we were allowed to do, of course. We still felt like children in an experimental nursery, watched through one-way glass. The pe-

culiar aspect to all this is that under these impoverished conditions a girl in my class managed to get herself pregnant though no one ever discovered how she did it. The rumor insisted that, when Miss Pee found out, she fainted first and then sent the girl to an abortionist.

Florence and I continued our ardent talks; I'm sure I learned as much from her as from most of my teachers. She had been unofficially tutored by a favorite uncle who had her reading the Encyclopedia at five and Copernicus at eleven. Every time I think about Florence now I feel terrible.

Florence was by far the closest thing to a scholar Buttercup Hall had ever seen. But she was no beauty; physically, she was a slob. I mean her neck was usually gray and her hair looked like an old doll's wig. I'm sure that if she hadn't been such a brilliant student (she carried six courses, when the rest of us carried only five, and one of them was Physics and another Greek) her parents would have been advised to find another school for Florence, a school better equipped for her special talents and aptitudes. In other words their daughter stood out like a grimy thumb. But Miss Pee and her cohorts needed Florence because she would up the school's academic standing with college admission officers. Boy, talk about dreary hypocrisy.

I wouldn't swear that Florence didn't sometimes deliberately keep her neck gray and her fingernails black and you can't exactly blame her.

"Another bath," she'd say as I gathered up my towel and soap dish and dusting powder, arraying myself for the trip down the hall to the showers, "and you'll turn into a goldfish." She would be in bed, reading a book, comfortable.

I never knew what to answer because her principle was the sane one: it *was* silly to bathe every night. I hardly ever got dirty except when I played field hockey and that was as seldom as possible (I mean they began to suspect something when I signed a pink slip pleading my period four Thursdays in a row so I had to play once in a while).

But after a shower I always thought the trouble was worth it: I love to feel clean and smooth and smelling like fake lilac. I'd walk a mile for a bath. Flo would have walked a mile to avoid one. Well, *chacune*, as I was learning.

One night after my shower I walked back into our room as usual and was struck by an oddly uncomfortable silence. Florence generally chattered but now she merely grunted or snuffled, a sign she wanted something. And simply because of this I felt timid: she rarely wanted anything from me: I was the asker, I the uninformed.

This was three weeks before graduation and the entire senior class was suffering from a kind of underground, epidemic hysteria. I remember Ann Goodhart was so excited at the idea of leaving Buttercup Hall in five weeks that she climbed out of her dorm window one night, hitchhiked into town (a good ten miles), went to the movies, got picked up by a sailor on leave, and spent all night with him at the Three-Star Motel. She could not wait the five weeks for freedom. One of the school's cooks spotted her the next morning, coming out of the motel, and informed Miss Pee, and though we all signed a petition for her, she was not allowed to graduate. The seniors were all feeling about to burst with impatience. They never for a moment thought that the post-school world might not be all they expected. And no one at B.H. ever warned us. Talk of an artificial society!

Florence was pretty much all set: her parents had been offered several juicy scholarships but since the Goldwaters did not need the help, they decided on M.I.T. (that is, she decided). She would be, literally, one girl in a thousand.

My admiration for my roommate had, I admit, made me somewhat slavish to her. After all, I was a year younger and an eternity more ignorant. We both had got used to her superiority and hardly thought about it although to give her credit I must say that she never abused her power over me. For instance, she might ask and expect me to make her bed if she was late for an early class and I was sitting around with nothing to do but she would

never ask me to walk back to the lab and retrieve a book that she had forgotten—and she was always forgetting things. It's fairly easy for me now to admit that I was silly to let this kind of relationship develop because I was almost her equal. I had cohered quite a lot since starting down Buttercup Hall. The tone of my letters home had finally swung into that nice casual say-nothingness which *seemed* to satisfy Mummy and Daddy. I had learned, a little bit late but better than never, how to manage with a boy. And the other girls liked me; I was neither brain nor athlete nor great beauty but I was easy-going, pleasant, a decent actress, and blondly good-looking. That is as honest as I can be about how I was, what I *seemed* to someone looking on.

I do not know yet what prompted Florence to do what she did this particular night; maybe this was her way of expressing the pregraduation hysteria. As I said I came back from my shower and Florence didn't tease me or say anything, just this throat-clearing and glancing. All around it was quiet, no visiting, no bridge, no peanut butter and jelly sandwiches: everybody was cramming for finals. I'd studied earlier and was sort of heady from all the facts I'd poured into my mind like BB's into an air rifle—to be fired off the next day into those little blue books with the paper which feels like unchewed gum.

I really didn't feel like talking.

I stood in front of the closet-door mirror and started to brush my hair. I was, without thinking, showing off, putting on a kind of exhibition for Florence and if I'd had any clear idea of what I was doing I would have gladly thrown my silver-handled brush into Buttercup Pond.

"Antoinette." Florence said this one word, quietly, giving it an ominous sound.

"Why are you calling me that stinky name?" I asked dumbly.

"Because it's a beautiful name and you ought to use it."

Was this *my* Florence? I stopped brushing and retreated into bed.

"I prefer Nicky," I said. My God, I must have sounded snotty.

"Well, you still have a lot to learn about taste, we know that already. However, I'll let it pass. Nicky Hapgood, you are perfect joy to look at, you are perfectly beautiful. How many children do you want, Nicky?"

"I never really thought about it," I lied, thinking that actresses don't have children except great ones, like Helen Hayes.

"Oh, you must have thought about it. Beautiful people want many beautiful children. But again, I won't argue. You know, Nicky Hapgood, you don't know anything about love. You think that a boy and a girl kiss each other and then fall in love and then marry and after that have children and that's that. You insist you know all about sex and that your mother gave you these ridiculous lectures that you don't for a minute believe but the incredible thing is you really *do* believe them. You think love is like a juicy piece of fruit, a peach or something, that's lying on a plate and all you have to do is sink your teeth into it and it's yours—yum yum."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," I said.

"That's what I mean. If you understood, then you'd understand." Florence was sitting up straight in her man's pajama top and threading her hands together. Her voice was sure, again, but her hands were terribly nervous. "What I'm trying to say, dumb-head, is it's not so simple."

"Well I know there's often trouble," I said, "but even trouble can be fairly simple. I mean, isn't that to be expected?"

"Trouble, trouble," Florence mumbled, "I wasn't talking about that kind of trouble."

"Well, what then?" I was beginning to feel uneasy about the turn of our conversation although I was still too thick to get what Florence was driving at.

"It's possible, isn't it," she demanded, "that a girl won't ever love a man, does that make her a leper or something?"

"Oh, Florence, just because you haven't got a boy-friend! I don't either and I'm not especially worried."

"Oh God," she groaned. "Why are you so literal-minded? Why must everything be spelled out for you?"

"It doesn't," I said. "I really honestly don't know what you're talking about. Why are you so miffed? What's the matter with you, Flo?"

"Well, I'm one of the ones who won't ever have a boy-friend—or get married," Florence whispered, and she shut her eyes and tears of confession rolled down her cheeks and down her pajamas and into her miserable bed.

"Florence," I said, and gasped. I didn't know then why I was so startled. I mean it wasn't as if she'd just told me she'd drowned her brother in the bathtub. But now I know: it was because I thought I knew her and obviously I didn't—not at all. To find out that someone you like very much is altogether different, to discover something you not only do not want to comprehend but, deep down, find pitiful and slightly stomach-turning (like, say, finding out that someone can't control his bladder and has to wear one of those contraptions strapped to his leg) is not exactly the sort of situation I went around looking for. In fact I loathed it.

"Me?" I said.

Florence shook her head violently, her lank hair slapping back and forth across her cheeks. Then she got out of bed and padded around opening drawers, looking for a Kleenex. I handed her the box I kept under my bed for late-at-night emotional emergencies and attacks of hay fever.

I was not quite sure I believed her about her feelings toward me.

"I had to tell you," she said, without explanation. "You're so god-damn dumb, Nicky, I don't know how you're going to exist without me next year." She blew her nose, wadded the hankie into a ball and dropped it beside the wastebasket.

At that moment I felt exactly the opposite: I didn't know how I was going to exist *until* next year. The very idea of living in the same room with a Lesbian—a girl who had the same desires and inclinations as a boy—horrificed me. (Would she sneak over while

I was asleep and try to feel my breasts; would she keep bumping into me?) I resolved to dress and undress in the bathroom and not to brush my hair, even, while Florence was in the room.

"Dumb," I said, dumbly, "I am, I know it. I should have realized. Poor Florence."

This statement seemed to destroy her self-pity and to make her angry. "Don't be sorry for Florence, kiddo," she said, more like her old self again, "she's got plenty of company. For instance," she challenged, "how do you suppose I know about Mrs. Simonsen?"

"Her too?"

"Her too. And Miss Brinley and Jane Abbot and Linda Emery and Brenda Bond and so on, ad nauseam."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes indeedy." Florence was safely back in bed now and was talking to the cracks on the ceiling. "You, Nicky, are sweet and innocent and we, nasty things, are soiled and spoiled, though we don't, ever, look for converts. You can't tell me—can you?—that I've in any way, shape, or form proselytized?"

"No," I admitted, half afraid that her revelation was going to continue and eventually encircle me. "Of course not." I paused. "Florence, I don't mind. Really I don't." It was about the dumbest and, as Danny would say, most half-assed, thing I ever said. And Florence knew it too. She sort of snorted and turned over to face the wall. And there were no snores from her for the longest time. A couple of hours, at least.

The thing was, I did mind. Naturally I minded. I minded as much for me as for Florence. It was well after two in the morning before I could follow Florence into sleep (the hands on the clock moved so slowly I thought it had stopped, but for its ticking which sounded like the movie version of a time bomb—hollow and shattering); I had to quiet my emotional trembles first. The trouble was I was never able to expect the unexpected.

I managed to exist in the same room with Florence quite well; after all I had no choice. But I was restrained and polite. Florence

was too. I mean things simply acquired a different, cooler tone. It was only three weeks. But there are five hundred and four hours in three weeks.

About a week after Florence's unveiling, I wrote to Danny. I missed him badly even though we were going to see each other very soon. Maybe I was just shifting from one prop (Florence) to another (Danny). I wanted to tell him about her but not at Florence's expense. It was difficult and I failed. I think I made her seem only pitiful and me only a louse.

Danny wrote back immediately, scolding me gently for not allowing people their idiosyncrasies. I must say at the time I thought he was overdoing the tolerance bit but now I see he just didn't think I ought to be so surprised at life's little surprises.

And when I got home in June, Danny was ready for me. He slipped into the subject slowly: he started by telling me about this teacher in his school who had been fired.

"Beal made the boys come up to his desk to get their papers and gave each of them a little goose, like this, as he turned to go back to his desk."

"I think that's perfectly awful," I said.

"Well sure it's awful," Danny said. "The girls felt neglected; they started complaining. Mr. Beal's very good-looking—in his faggoty way."

"Danny, it's not the same thing as Florence. Mr. Beal's obviously a pervert."

"A pervert! Nicky, please don't use that word. It makes you sound ugly, like you wanted to cut off his nuts or something. Beal's a moron 'cause he's sick and hasn't got the sense to keep his symptoms to himself. But he's not any more a pervert than your Florence. God I hate that word!"

Danny and I were banging around the kitchen making sandwiches before going to bed. He opened a can of tuna fish, held his thumb over the top, letting the oil drip into the sink, and dumped the entire contents into a roll he had sliced in half. Then he found a jar of pimento and dumped most of it on top,

then he smeared a huge gob of mustard on *that* and sat on the sandwich with the heel of his hand. He got practically half the sandwich down in the first bite. I waited for him to swallow, glad of the delay because I felt, as I usually did with Danny, that I really didn't know what I was talking about. It isn't Danny's fault, in fact it's probably the last thing he's trying to do. It's just that he seems to have slid onto the right track somewhere 'way back, while I am still waiting for someone to pick me up and deposit me there.

"Okay," I said, "I admit that neither Mr. Beal nor Florence Goldwater are perverts. But I *still* can't get used to the idea of, oh you know, it's queer and warped and . . . well, how could I live in the *same room* with a Lesbian?"

"You'd live in the same room with a vegetarian, wouldn't you?" Danny poked around in the refrigerator and came up with a can of beer. He pried two holes through the top.

"You allowed to drink beer?"

"You going to squeal?"

I shook my head. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"Well, would you or wouldn't you?" he asked, taking a long swallow.

"Would I or wouldn't I what?"

"Live with a vegetarian?"

"That's stupid, Danny. What's that got to do with Florence?"

"Vegetarian: different tastes, not yours. Homo: different tastes, not yours. Don't make so much of the difference."

"You know perfectly well," I said, "that you can't stick vegetarians and Lesbians in the same boat." Then I began to giggle at the picture of a bunch of Lesbians and vegetarians bobbing up and down in a lifeboat (I always think of the "same boat" as a lifeboat, for some reason). Then Danny caught it, and started to laugh too and we had a giggle session that lasted about five minutes. Danny added a few more funny kinds of people to the boat like "Christian Scientists!" and "epileptics!", and then we decided to sink it because it was getting too full and too sad.

Our little talk ended by Danny, now slightly cocky, telling me that "you know, Nicky, sometimes people like Florence are much better friends—in the sense of being really *friends*—than ordinary people. I mean if they like you they'll stand up for you. And stand by you, too."

"How do *you* know so much about it, you had experience?" I was beginning to resent him for being so damn right all the time.

"I don't know," he said. He finished off the beer and carefully put the empty beer can under some paper bags in the trash basket. "I must have read about it somewhere."

In one way I felt much better about Florence after Danny got hold of me; I mean I found the *idea* of what she was not so hard to take; I accepted it. But in another way I felt worse because when I got back to school the next year there was no Florence.

VII

MY LAST YEAR at Buttercup Hall was not in any sense a climax. It was merely more of the same, with intensive drilling in old College Entrance Examinations, a rash of special rites and rituals for the Senior Buttercup, and continued chafing against a multitude of restrictions.

But I missed Florence. And having been brought around to discover that she was really a very sympathetic person instead of thinking of her as pathetic and/or repulsive, I had to admit that I needed desperately to talk to her. And there was no one who seemed remotely like her, who might substitute. So, to make the best of things, I got one of the half-dozen single rooms available to Seniors. It was high up in what was known as the "tower" but which was actually part of an attic. It had a sloping roof, which I cracked my head against the first few times I got up from my desk but I soon learned to bend and then I found the room peaceful and warm in winter and sometimes I was able to feel it was a room of one's own—my own.

My chief worries centered around getting my work done and carrying out my duties as president of the drama club at the same time. All of us looked forward to June and Freedom, but Red Ridge Junior College, the next step on the great pyramid of my

education, seemed light-years away. There was a strangeness to this quiet last year of school that I've never been able to quite understand. It should, abstractly, have been one in which I did a lot and in which a lot happened to me—you know, growth. But, aside from the dramatic club, I was involved in very little. I went out with boys during Christmas and spring vacations and a few times in between, but nothing and nobody made an impression on me that lasted more than about twenty-four hours. It was a lonely lull, that senior year, and I don't really know why. Did I want life to slow down, not move along so fast? Was I starting to be afraid?

If my parents seem, somewhat, to have slipped into the background it is because nothing about my relationship with them had basically changed, even if I had learned how to write to them. Mother was as concerned as ever about my health and morals and Daddy about what he called my "happiest days" and my morals. My God, you would have thought that I had the roundest heels in Connecticut. The fact was I was still as virgin as the driven snow, and that's pretty virgin. But I guess it won't be revealing too much at this point to say that my parents' continual promptings on virtue's behalf had the same effect on me as the little boy whose mother forbade him to stick beans up his nose.

Anyway, Granny died my final year at school and no one in our family very much felt (for different reasons) like going to her house in Maine and Daddy decided that a trip to Europe would be the perfect antidote to our mourning.

The idea of going to Europe seemed a sort of literal venturing East of the sun and West of the moon and when all the clothes had been purchased and packed and all the supplies laid in (I think Mother thinks no one outside of the U.S.A. brushes his teeth or washes his hair or uses deodorant) and when the Queen finally backed out of her berth, turned, and slid past the Empire State and the Battery and Staten Island and out into

the enormous rolling gray ocean I was so agitated that I was sure I was going to throw up.

"Hi, old girl," said my father, coming up behind me at the railing where I was trying to recover my equilibrium, and putting an arm across my shoulders, "bored already?"

"Oh no, Daddy, I feel wonderful. I just can't believe we're really going." I saw Danny talking to a deck steward. The steward smiled, pointed, looked at his watch, smiled again. I envied Danny his ease; he could have charmed a toad.

"Well I must say," Daddy told me, "you have a funny way of showing it. You look as if you had an appointment with the dentist. Cheer up, this is only the beginning." And he almost slapped me on the back. He was so anxious to have me exhibit my feelings, the way he did.

You see, not even my family, who think they have a courtesy ticket for my inside track, know this simple little thing about me, about my not smiling or showing excitement. I wanted to tell Daddy about it but something held me back. I was hurt that he didn't know everything about me but I would not give him the satisfaction of my secrets.

"Daddy, may I please go out on dates when we're in Europe? Will there be time?"

"Of course, Nicky, there'll be time. And your mother and I have some friends with sons just about your age—we have already written them about you."

"Oh," I said, sickly, and beginning to realize that my exhilaration might be nothing more nor less than optimism. It wasn't that I didn't want to spend hours in the Louvre and the Pitti Palace and stand inside the Colosseum, where people were eaten alive, and ride through the Bois de Boulogne and over the Grand Canal and listen to the echoes in the Forum and get tan on a beach in Nice—I wanted everything I'd heard or read about, things I could do or see by myself or with Danny, things I could have done or seen only in Europe. But I also wanted to dance in a Paris night club and be kissed on the Left Bank—things that needed a

man. My expansive feelings required someone to embrace (it did not have to be the same someone every time) or I was sure they would disappear. But if Daddy sensed these feelings in me at all (which I doubt), he was afraid of them. Why is he always so frightened of hidden feelings?

So you can imagine what our European tour turned out to be: all the fatigue and little of the fun; everything seen in a frenzy of zeal and then measured by the wrong standards. We visited the museums all right and saw the Grand Canal and ate flaming something at the Tour d'Argent and stayed with friends of Daddy's in London (business friends) but if there was a world of adventure and sudden love there I never saw it—any more than I was permitted in a Left Bank *boîte* after midnight or the taste of the kiss of a stranger. I confess that my notion of the "romance" of Europe came principally from popular novels and movies but my parents' attitude had, I insist, even less reality than mine.

It was as if they were afraid of whatever joy you could wring from an afternoon spent sitting in a Paris park chair, just watching the people and smelling the strangeness and getting dusty and then, as you sat there, having a dark man lingering near you, his eye on a pretty young girl, plump with expectation.

One afternoon Daddy did rent some chairs for us because we'd been walking all morning and Mummy's feet had begun to swell; I could see them bulging out of the high-heeled pumps, which she never should have put on in the first place. Mummy said she'd have to sit down immediately or she'd die. "My stomach says yes, my feet say no, Nick, I'm sorry, but I've just got to rest for a while. Why don't we get some of those cute wire chairs?" Daddy pleased Mummy that time even though I could see he didn't want to stop. He hardly ever does want to stop what he's doing.

So we sat down and what surrounded me was a wonderful cloud of pure and passive pleasure, like a blob of whipped cream on your tongue and I didn't want to leave—ever. Four swans patronized an apple-shaped pond nearby and a group of children were actually running after hoops with their colored sticks and I

had almost convinced myself that Marcel Proust was going to walk over to me and watch the children across my shoulder. And then I heard Daddy say:

"May, do you see that young man—that dark one—over there? I think he's staring at Nicky."

Mother twisted around in her chair so she could inspect him and said, "I believe you're right, Nick."

"Where, Daddy?"

"Nicky, I don't want you to look at him; he's just a fresh pug."

Naturally, I gazed at the man and what I saw was no fresh pug but by far the most beautiful person I'd ever laid eyes on: a man with black hair and a long straight nose and blue eyes begging me to meet them. He was just standing there, upright and free as the trees close by, and I experienced, with fiery delight, what the French call a *frisson*.

"Nick," Mother said, "do you think you should go over and talk to him and send him away or do you think we ought to find a policeman? Maybe we should just get up and leave. Nicky, stop staring at him this minute!"

"I'm not, Mummy." I was.

"I'm sure the best way to handle this," my father said, as if he were speaking to his vice-presidents, "is to act naturally, that is, simply get up and walk away."

Mother groaned but nodded.

I was still shivering and I appealed, silently, to Danny who, up to now, had been taking millions of pictures with his Leica and paying no attention whatever to his parents' conversation. (This not listening is one of his better habits; I, on the other hand, can't *not* listen.) Danny, with typically neat logic, shrugged at me. What could he do?

So we all abandoned the chairs like unwanted cleaner's hangers. And the swans and the children and the pleasure. We found a taxi and hurtled back to our fancy hotel where Daddy delivered a lecture to me entitled "Flirting with Strangers" or "The Need to Be Extra Careful When Among Foreigners."

And then, napping later, I thought about it. Say I had been alone and had encouraged the man with my eyes and he had come over and we had talked and then walked off somewhere together and he had bought me an apéritif at some sidewalk café and the day had melted into evening and then, silently, into night and we had got closer and closer until finally we were so close we found ourselves in his bed—if all that had happened, would I really have been happy? I knew the answer was No because the end of my daydream grazed the unknown, and the unknown, that dark little shed with howling in it, still terrified me.

The intriguing thing about the incident in France was that it happened again—in Rome—and the second man was equally handsome, my shiver just as icy, my parents' reaction just as predictably irritating. I thought I was destined to be swept away, on the tide of Daddy's anger, every time love got near me. I now know that what I felt those times was not love at all but sex: everyday, plebeian, down-to-earth sex. And that Daddy was probably right.

When we were in England I was nearly killed in an automobile accident. While it was happening and immediately afterwards I was spared the usual panic but when it was all over and I had the chance to dwell on it (an unpleasant habit of mine, rather like picking scabs), I got into a real funk and couldn't smile for about a month. It was such a bad time for me that even Danny failed to cheer me up and, though she was unable to convince my father, Mummy was all for having me go to a psychiatrist. Daddy said something about "mumbo-jumbo" and "quacks" and the subject was dropped. Funny, because later, after the worst happened, he was perfectly delighted to pay for my rewiring.

The day of the accident Mummy and Danny and I were driving to Stratford for a day's Cultural Outing. Daddy was not with us; he had people to see in The City and had sent us off in a rented car, a huge saloon thing, with a rented guide. Danny had not wanted to come, especially, and he was trying to look gloomy and look out of the window at the same time. The view. *however*

was nine-tenths obscured by a cold damp fog that deposited ribbons of moisture on the windows and was so chill it seemed to be taking little bites out of you. And this was August. I had asked Mother if I could sit next to the driver and at first she had objected because she thought it looked improper but then she shrugged and said "I guess it's all right; nobody knows us here." I've always liked it up front, ever since I was old enough to be allowed to ride beside Daddy when he drove.

Besides, our guide was young and handsome, a gentleman. He told Mother he went to Oxford on scholarship and earned money during the holidays by driving tourists (like us) around London and nearby cultural watering places. He seemed very nice and polite, not windy, like a lot of American college boys I knew. His name was Gifford Findley. He steered us out of the city and into the country with the neat, unobtrusive skill of a butler and swung us onto a two-lane highway (going the wrong way I kept thinking) oddly free of traffic. I remember looking in vain for an archway of trees over the road, like in France, and being terribly disappointed. I decided that going after culture this way, this ticking off items on a compulsive list of things to be seen, was for the birds. I couldn't even see any birds. Mother started to ask Gifford Findley questions designed to impress him with her knowledge of English literature and history and he was answering her with the last word in politeness—I wasn't, in truth, quite sure he even found her amusing, he was so good at dead-pan.

"I understand, Mr. Findley, that you English make quite a thing of the homes of your important writers. Isn't there a shrine or something for Wordsworth, in Shropshire?"

"Grasmere, Mrs. Hapgood. Do you like to walk? If you do, you might enjoy a tour on foot through the Lake District. I believe you will also see there something of the traces of Samuel Coleridge."

Danny muttered "In a pig's eye," just as Mummy, not hearing him, said, "That sounds very interesting. I'll speak to Mr. Hapgood about it. That sounds like fun, doesn't it, Danny?" Mother

was all enthusiasm for the idea of an expedition she would never, in a million years, undertake.

"Un huh," Danny said. As a matter of fact, of all of us in the Hapgood family, Danny is the only one who might conceivably enjoy walking through the Lake District. Daddy loves to drive his car in the country and I don't mind walking in cities—but a week on the moors would drive me batty.

"Danny," Mother said sharply, "you might be a trifle more polite to Mr. Findley."

"Oh that's perfectly all right, Mrs. Hapgood," Mr. Findley said solidly, "I can understand his want of fervor. A hike like that can be frightfully dull stuff if you're not the sort. Frankly, Mr. Hapgood, I'm not either." He turned around and smiled at my brother.

Danny, in one of his rare glooms, clutched silence even closer. I could almost feel, in empathy, the muscles of his legs twitching against his immobility. I could almost hear what he was thinking: "Why is Mom taking this phony trip to Stratford when she'd be much better off shopping or getting tanked up at Claridge's?"

As for me, I wished Mother would be quiet but I was beginning to enjoy being shut up in this automobile with Mr. Gifford Findley. I tried to make periodic, inconspicuous inspections of the Findley profile: he had long, honey-colored hair meandering above his ears, bright blue eyes, high and sharp cheek bones. The skin of his cheeks had round, red patches on them, like a Methodist lady in a downtown restaurant. He was wearing a jacket so tweedy it had little twigs sticking out of it. He hardly looked like a man working his way through college. Perhaps, I fantasized, he was a member of the impoverished nobility, possessor of a title and a run-down castle, chauffeuring for the summer in order to save the estate from falling into the clutches of the Labour Government, the latter-day man with the handle-bar mustache and the wicked laugh, who was threatening to seize it and convert it into an experimental pig farm. Mr. Gifford Findley, it struck me suddenly, was blindingly attractive.

"Are you in college in America, Miss Hapgood?"

"Yes," I answered, trying to sound the depths of his actual politeness.

"Antoinette will start at Red Ridge Junior College in the fall, Mr. Findley." My mother's voice came bouncing into the front seat with us.

Damn, I thought, now he will think I'm lying. I was furious with Mother for splitting hairs. "Yes, I start in the fall," I said to him.

"Red Ridge College," Gifford said, "I don't believe I've heard of it."

"Oh, it's just a small, girls' school near Boston," I said.

"Oh, I see," he said.

Our conversation struck me as an extreme example of stilted talk. I looked, in despair, through the window. The fog had thickened and the moisture was now a soft, steady rain, depressingly consistent. Whatever swept by us seemed all gray and low and wet. How could we bear to stay in the car together this way?

"Mr. Findley," I said finally, "you must tell us where we are and where we're going and what to look for. We're really awfully ignorant."

Apparently this admission appealed to him for he began talking at a great rate about London, about the Restoration, about the Establishment. About people. And every so often he would snap out of profile and give me a swift smile.

Mother actually shut up and I knew, without even looking, that Danny was listening too; we'd all assumed appropriate positions in an animate quadrangle. I looked at my watch and wondered why I wasn't hungry yet: it was almost one o'clock.

Gifford was saying, "And in a way the Globe stood for the integrity of Renaissance Man—and even if God is willing we're not likely to see that sort of thing again." He turned to deliver his final syllable to me, and then we crashed.

I think my first sensation was wetness. I couldn't move and then I could, a little, and so I crawled my left hand along until it met my thigh, which, I realized, was resting in a chilly puddle.

Then with a grand effort I took my hand on another trip—to my forehead—and then to in front of my eyes: it was very red and sticky-looking and seeing it made me feel sick so I closed my eyes and started to cry and Mother was yelling, "Nicky, Nicky! Danny! Danny! Oh my God, Nicky!"

My right leg was still inside the car and my head was lying on the road, bleeding and undignified. I tried to pull my leg out of the car but the pain was so terrific that I decided to leave that job to someone else.

Just a second before I fell back to sleep I saw Mr. Gifford Findley, one arm bent a couple of times over and under the steering wheel and his legs sprawling in opposite directions—ways in which they could not conceivably go unless both were broken.

What had happened was a small scarlet Porsche had sprung at us out of the mist and smacked us head-on. Two cars met violently and destroyed each other. The driver of the Porsche broke his back; he died in the ambulance.

This is the tally of our damage: a broken wrist for Danny and glass in his cheek and two broken teeth. Mother got a cracked rib and a dandy sprained ankle. For some bureaucratic reason they took Mr. Findley to a different hospital than us. He, apparently, had a very rough time of it: two fractured legs (I was right), a smashed arm, and a multitude of disfiguring bruises; he was definitely out of the guide business—at least for that season.

And me: a superficial scratch on my scalp (which bled madly), a severe concussion, and about a million bruises and scrapes, and a dreadful, searing pain brought about by the knowledge that in the crash someone had died.

I was only in the hospital for six days and when it was time to leave I didn't feel like leaving. I was sure it was too soon for me to be up although the doctor had given Mother repeated assurances that I was recovered.

"We've taken the added precaution of another set of skull X-rays, Mrs. Hapgood," Dr. Samp said to Mummy the day I was sprung, "and I'm delighted to report they show no damage what-

ever. Your charming daughter (and he flashed me a big medical smile) will feel quite herself in another day or so."

"What about my headache?" I asked him.

"My dear, you will have to expect headache for a little while. Aspirin should relieve the pain. I assure you it is nothing to be concerned about: your skull sustained a nasty crack and this is its way of telling you it is still on the mend, so to speak. You are a strong, healthy girl and you should recover from this completely. I wouldn't recommend mountain climbing for a bit, however." Mild smiles from me and Mummy at this mild joke.

When the time to check out of the hospital arrived, Daddy was all smiles and, in an odd way, shy.

"Well, old girl," he said to me as Mother and I stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby, "glad to have you back with the living. But where are your battle wounds? It's going to be difficult to explain this Purple Heart to the General." And with that, he took from his jacket pocket a little black box and handed it to me. I opened it slowly and saw a tiny medal, a coin really, attached to a sliver of purple grosgrain pasted on a tiny bar of some metal with a pin on the back. I looked at Daddy's expectant eyes and kissed him on his cheek.

"Thank you, Daddy, you're terribly sweet."

"Not me," he said, continuing the make-believe, possibly because it was his only defense against a sentimental embarrassment, "the high command. Come on, old girl, the staff car's waiting. We're all going to Simpson's for a celebration. Let's get her on her way, May." Mother touched my elbow and started me off.

The idea of a big rich public meal, with its dripping red meat and greasy potatoes, was not at all appetizing. In fact I would have given anything to go straight to our hotel, lie down, pull the comforter up to my chin, turn on the radio to some music, close my eyes and just lie there for a week. Medal and all (and I pinned it on my suit for Daddy), I had started falling into the depression I mentioned before. I know there was no reason for it: I was not injured, I was strong and healthy, as the doctor had

told me, but sometimes you can't help how you feel. I just couldn't help thinking that my body was fragile. I had absolutely no confidence in it any more and I was sure that if I were not terribly careful I would shatter in a million pieces.

And I could not help dreaming about the man who died. Every night.

I've always been fairly successful at hiding my deepest feelings but this time they so absorbed my life that Daddy and Mummy caught on to what was happening to me. Thus, I had the pain of the headaches (which aspirin only partially helped), the indescribable weight of my gloom, and the anxiety of my parents to contend with. Not a very jolly setup for a girl supposed to be having the time of her life in Europe.

Gifford Findley. He sent a bunch of daisies and violets to my hospital from his. By the time he was out of bed, I was out of England and in school.

I'm sure I might have liked him very much.

VIII

I WASN'T SHARP ENOUGH to be embarrassed for my parents on our trip; I felt only mildly uncomfortable when they acted as if the bathroom fixtures were more important than the view from the window or it truly mattered that the steak was never rare. I wanted them to speak the language (whichever it happened to be) or speak softly or not speak at all. I would have liked to go off with Danny on a small trip of our own, exploring our own territory but somehow it never seemed to fit into their plans. Looking back, it seems to me that I never really "saw" or felt Europe any more than I would have if we'd been riding around in an air-conditioned trailer, passively absorbing the sights through a picture window.

So much for that. Oh, yes, I did come home with a dress from Dior. It was beautiful: gray and pink satin with a tight little bodice and a bell-shaped skirt. Mother said I would be the most envied girl at college.

It was all settled, as I said, that I would go to Red Ridge Junior College in Massachusetts. I could have got into Wellesley, or maybe even Bryn Mawr, but my family had persuaded me to try Red Ridge first on the theory that if I felt I wanted more education I could always transfer later. For a Junior College Red Ridge is *not* unspeakable; I mean if you want to go on and get your Bachelor's degree, most any good women's college will take

you—if your marks are good enough. When Daddy and Mummy and I decided on Red Ridge I was so fed up with tedious assignments, long term papers, three-hour examinations, and a prisoner's psychology that the idea of finishing my education in two years instead of four sounded just dandy.

And besides—no not besides, this was very fundamental—how much college does an actress need? But I didn't mention that to my family. They played, for once, right into my hands.

I knew a few girls from home who were at Red Ridge and they seemed to like it. At least no one told me to stay away, like one girl who went to Vassar and hated it because it was so isolated. Red Ridge is near Harvard and, if you are hard up, M.I.T. and B.U. and, if you are desperate, Babson Institute. Men, in other words, in quantities. The funny thing about that is that I met Bradley Evers soon after I came to Red Ridge but he went to Georgia Tech. So all the men in the vicinity were sort of wasted. I might just as well have gone to Nome Junior College, if there is such a place. Bradley and I met, we promised each other many important things, and then he went back down to school and courted me by mail, a relationship full of waiting and suspense but hardly satisfactory, if you know what I mean.

In 1954 a group of Red Ridge alumnae got together and, designating themselves The Committee on Public Relations, presented the Board of Trustees with a memorandum suggesting that the name of the college be changed; Red Ridge sounded communistic. The memorandum cited the fact that Harvard had recently changed the name of its undergraduate radio station from The Crimson Network to WHRB and that Cincinnati had added the word Legs to its Red baseball team. Honestly. All the ladies on this particular committee were, by some coincidence, married to very rich men, and since women's colleges generally get the short end of the financial stick, the trustees considered the proposal seriously. The story goes that the board was willing to change the name of the college but it couldn't come up with a name that everyone agreed on, so Red Ridge remained Red and as the

hysteria faded so did the Alumnae Committee on Public Relations. I say "the story goes" because this sweet little tale is part of the oral history that every new girl learns as soon as she's settled with the registrar. It may, of course, be fiction, but I doubt it: it sounds too right.

As a matter of fact, it is not at all obvious why the place is called Red Ridge. The campus itself goes through the normal annual Northeastern sequence: green, orange, gray, and white. The soil under its rolling lawns isn't red, it's brown, and the ridge, supposedly eponymous, is just a bulge under the central lawn, which is known not as The Red but The Green. Maybe the founder liked alliteration, maybe he loved the fall (which is breathtaking, and some of the leaves *do* turn red before dropping), but at any rate Red Ridge it is and Red Ridge it will be until rich men stop sending their daughters to fancy schools to get half an education.

Physically, Red Ridge Junior College is quite agreeable. The dormitories and academic buildings are small and not, thank God, neo-Gothic but neo-Georgian. If they feel obliged to build neo-anything (which it seems they do) better Georgian than Gothic. I mean, to me Yale looks as if it should be in Salisbury, England, along with Princeton. Harvard, on the other hand, looks okay on the Charles, not great, but okay. Anyway, Red Ridge fits in with its surroundings fairly well.

The dormitories at Red Ridge are called (hold onto your lunch) elegant girls' names. For instance, I lived in Constance. Then there were Victoria, Charity, Jessica, Abigail, and so on. The only co-operative house, for scholarship and partial scholarship girls, was Jane. Twenty girls lived in Constance and we got to know each other very well—in some cases, I suspect, better than we wanted to. But there is something to be said for the troop-ship atmosphere of a woman's dorm: it makes you appreciate privacy for the rest of your life. I was so fed up with having everybody know what I got in the mail, how many cookies I got from home, and how much I paid for my shoes that, by the end of my senior

year, I wouldn't have been surprised if the president of the college, Dr. Jocelyn, had personally sent me a laxative if I'd been constipated.

I soon discovered at Red Ridge a number of alarming similarities with Buttercup Hall. I was surprised, for instance, by the same official suspicions of a girl's moral judgment: there were almost as many rules regarding the social behavior of the proper young lady. But if the official position was unequivocal, the student body's was not; it had learned, through the oral tradition I mentioned, to be thoroughly law-abiding when watched and renegade when not. I was amazed when I found out that twenty girls in the senior class, a class of 300, had had at least one abortion and three of them had had two; that beer was as much an after-dinner staple as peanut butter (you simply had to be clever in hiding it); that overnight permissions were practically a farce: a girl in Constance used regularly to sign out for her aunt and uncle in Brookline and then go down to the next village and spend the night with the man who taught riding at Red Ridge.

I think that everyone was astonished at first but got over it quickly. And you had, at the point where your surprise changed into acceptance, to pretend that you were never surprised in the beginning. So whatever moral attitude a Red Ridge girl held, it was held in secret, for your own protection. The key to social achievement was: the more you can get away with the more acceptable you are.

About Red Ridge's academic philosophy: I think the Board of Trustees had long before decided that what it wanted to turn over to the world was not the scholar but the Young Woman Prepared for Life. So we all had a kind of secure and settled feeling as we went to class and did our assignments. To illustrate: the curriculum lumped English and History together into something called The Historical Humanities and a survey course in this subject included parts of 252 books (supposed to be read in three and a half months). It turned out that the most widely read book in the freshman year was the trot sold under the counter at

the co-operative book store. Nevertheless, and in spite of everything, I liked Red Ridge. We had a superior drama department and I got full credit for completing a course entitled "A History of Theaters: an examination of great playhouses, past and present, with special emphasis on the sociology of the pit, the problem of acoustics, and the symbolism of the apron."

I starred in just about every play The Thalia, our drama society, put on. I won't go into each one but they included the lot—from *Candida* to *The Tempest*. This was just dandy for my ego but it had its dismal aspect too for it began to make me believe seriously that I had something other girls did not. If I wasn't quite an artist, at least I was mistress of a talent, which to my mind was much more impressive than owning a beaver coat or a convertible or being the daughter of an admiral. It also, I confess, gave me an exalted idea of my own importance. Daddy says that if I hadn't inflated myself into some sort of latter-day Duse, I probably would not have gotten into all that trouble later. That it was this fraudulent assurance of mine that nobody could ever say or think anything bad about me, that everyone would just adore me no matter what I did, that allowed me to go on and behave so irresponsibly. But this he said to me in private: in public he stood by me all the way.

You might be thinking, then, that in all this time I hadn't matured at all, that I still believed our lives were given to us as part of a fair deal, that the great ruddy visage of God looks down and sees to it that the rough is made smooth and the crooked straight, that our redemption is certain, and that if we will just cross over we can always walk on the sunny side. All that jazz.

I believed these things for a long time—much longer than most girls. And Bradley, poor sweet Bradley, was partly responsible. But that's not quite fair: I found Bradley and I used him. If it hadn't been for Bradley, my innocence, which was as painful as a sunburn, would have faded into the even tan of grown-up skepticism. I hung onto my innocence, through my disastrous commit-

ment to Bradley, and when I finally realized what was happening, it was too late: my cultivated innocence nearly killed me.

It is now time to introduce Bradley Evers.

Bradley is very tall; and handsome, without flash. He is also sure of himself, without conceit. He is kind, generous, thoughtful, courteous, and so forth. But here's the trap: I don't remember *ever* giving much thought to whether he was unique or exciting. You see, I had two wholly separate ideas of what love was: it was either wild and dangerous or something steady, safe, and comfortable. If a girl had one she could not have the other. When I met Bradley he was so *nice* that I made the mistake of not thinking about him; I just sort of accepted the fact that he was my Mr. Right.

We met on a blind date.

Marian Fisher, a girl from Georgia who lived next door to me at Red Ridge, sashayed into my room one Thursday night after supper. "Hi, Nicky honey, you busy Saturday night?" she asked me and then sat down on my bed and started buffing her nails with some gadget she had brought in with her for that operation.

"Why?" I didn't have to ask why and I could have said no right away but something always keeps me from coming right out with it. I mean, if my mother asks me if I will please do something for her I always ask "what?" before I say "yes." I'm not really a very obliging person. I don't know if I'll ever be—or if I ever want to be.

"Because there's this fellow, Tom Garringer, I have a date with and Tom has a friend from college who wants to go out with one of my friends." She blew on her little chamois buffer and went back to work with it. She had beautiful, long, shimmery nails.

"What's his name? What college?"

"Bradley something. I'm not sure what his last name is. He and Tom are at Georgia Tech. I've never met Bradley but Tom says he is one good-looking boy. You interested?" In spite of her manner Marian was pretty straightforward about things. I liked her for it.

"Georgia Tech," I said, still stalling. "What are they doing up here?"

"Tom came to see me, silly. And Bradley came along for the ride. His family has lots of money. Actually, it was Bradley's car."

I looked at Marian with new interest. If a boy drove all the way from Georgia Tech to see a girl on a week end when there wasn't even a dance then he must be almost engaged to her. It drifted into my mind that they might be sleeping together too.

"Are you engaged to Tom?" I asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes we are." She glanced down to avoid my eyes. "But if my folks knew about it they'd kill me. Tom's half Jewish." She looked up at me. "On his mother's side."

"I'm sorry," I said, not really caring very much; it all seemed so remote, somehow. "Is Bradley too?" It was a stupid question.

"I don't think so," Marian said. "Does it matter?" She was annoyed. "Listen, are you interested or not? I've got to let Tom know; he's calling me in ten minutes and I have to let him know then."

"Sure," I said.

"You know," Tom Garringer said, smiling wickedly, "my mother once swallowed her wedding ring."

We had just finished gorgeous steaks and ale and we were, the four of us, sitting in this restaurant, just sitting, waiting for nothing, talking. I was having a good time.

"Oh heavens, Tom. What's the joke this time?" Marian said, her face lit up with delight.

"No joke, honest honey," Tom said to her, squeezing her hand. "Mom swallowed her wedding ring."

"Tell, tell," I urged. I was looking at Bradley Evers.

"Well," Tom began, "she'd just had this awful fight with old Pop. Damned if I know what about. His side of the family, probably, it usually was that. They couldn't ever get used to the idea that she was. You know what they called her—honest to Christ—they called her a Hebrew. Anyway, when Pop was feeling his

liquor, which was pretty much all the time, he used to see how hard he could make her cry. She'd play too: she'd try not to. Sometimes she'd almost go off her rocker trying not to let him see her cry. I guess the old man was kind of a monster the way he'd tear into her, calling her the things he'd heard his family call her behind her back and blaming her for being what she couldn't help. This time it was worse than I'd ever seen it. I was scared—forgive me, ladies—shitless. He never did beat her, though. I felt sorry for her but I was too scared to do anything to help her. Didn't I ever tell you, Marian, what a coward I was?"

"You're not a coward, honey, what could you do?"

"Well, I was only about seven or eight." Thus satisfied, Tom brightened again. "Anyway, this one time Mom was bawling so bad she'd fallen in a heap on the floor. I really wanted to kill the old man, but, as I said, I was gutless. Poor Mom, she was sitting there, heaving and sobbing and pulling her ring off and pushing it back on and then pulling it off again like her fingers would fall off if she stopped. Then what-do-you-know, she put the damn thing in her mouth, sort of gulped, and down it went." He stopped and looked at each one of us as if he had just announced the birth of Jesus or something.

Bradley Evers spoke: "My goodness, how did she get it back?"

"All of a sudden," Tom continued, "she quit crying and to look at her face you would have thought she'd swallowed a live crab. First thing, I thought she was going to upchuck but she got over that and then she started pleading with me not to tell Pop (he'd left the room, disgusted, a couple of minutes before)."

"Didn't your father find out?" Marian asked.

"Sure he did, honey. As soon as he came back from the liquor cabinet he saw right away it wasn't on her finger and he started accusing her of just about everything he could think of—and that was plenty—he being a divorce lawyer."

"And, and . . . ?" Marian prodded.

Tom finished off his glass of ale and beckoned the waitress to bring over another round. Then he went on: "It came out, I

guess, 'cause the next thing I knew it was back on her finger again. And it's still there, far as I know. It's Mom's cross she has to bear. End of story."

"End of story!" Marian cried. "That's an awful anticlimax."

"Sorry, sugar-pet," Tom said, "that's the way the cookie crumbles."

I thought his last statement was just plain silly and almost spoiled him for me. Then Bradley said, "I think your old man's a bully."

"You're damn right he is," Tom answered.

Bradley's observation was rankly obvious but instead of wincing I was pleased with him for making it. I mean, only a sympathetic person would have bothered.

When Marian introduced me to Bradley I sensed, on his part, a tremble of recognition but he didn't, the way so many boys do, start in on that "Haven't we met somewhere before?" routine which is the world's lamest opening. He just stayed pretty quiet.

But I knew right away he'd fallen for me. All the time Tom was telling that stupid story about his mother, Bradley's face was slowly going to pieces. He was mad about me. Just like that. I mean I hardly opened my mouth myself but as far as Bradley was concerned I didn't have to. I was flattered, of course—every girl likes to think that men desire her madly—but it was somewhat bewildering at the same time. After all, was I ready to be adored and idolized? Was I prepared to give myself totally to one man? I thought not, but Bradley, as soon as we got alone together, convinced me I was. He convinced me by overwhelming me with sweet talk, administered like high-voltage X-ray, very intense over a short period.

Besides, the problem seemed solved (oh, what a deception) by the fact that Bradley would have to go back to Georgia the next day.

What I did was I gave in. I allowed myself to be persuaded into an innocent (though he was convinced it was intimate) understanding with Bradley Evers. I did not think into the future

at all. What could happen with him 1000 miles away? This was the start of it, my star-struck predicament. This was the first step in an impossible direction. I might have been an elephant attempting to negotiate a tightrope.

This is the principal thing I see in Bradley: he is amiable. These are the two principal things Daddy sees in Bradley: he is amiable. He is quote acceptable unquote. This is how my darling little brother Danny sees Bradley: he is amiable. He is a jerk.

I find it hard to resurrect any conversation I have had with Bradley Evers because everything he says sounds so unprofitable. Not that I'm any Aspasia myself but, since I'm pledged to an accurate history, I can hardly not be impatient with having to record his platitudes. For instance (if I can bear it) here is the scene at the car as Marian and I said good-by to our "men" Sunday night of that first week end. Marian and Tom are earnestly searching one another's eyes, saying nothing because there is nothing that has not already been said. Bradley and Nicky are sitting on a scrap of stone wall near the margin of Red Ridge Pond.

Bradley: Nicky, sweetest, it just about kills me to think that Tommy had to twist my arm to get me to come up here. I know it sounds screwy but you know how I'm always going to think of this week end? Fate. It was fate that made me come.

Nicky: I hadn't thought about it that way but I guess you're right. I can't think of any earthly way we would have met otherwise. (I didn't know then that Mr. Evers had gone to Yale with Daddy and that they still exchanged bottles of Scotch at Christmas. But I was substantially right anyway.)

Bradley: Will you answer my letters? Because I'm going to write you every day.

Nicky: Of course I will, Bunny. (Even then the idea of writing someone every day was rather overpowering. I mean what is there to say? Or do you write very large, with wide margins all around and lots of little pictures to fill up the white spaces? Or do you tell him like you woke up in the morning and found a mouse turd in your sneaker, and then when you got down to breakfast one of

the girls told a nasty joke about a hunchback girl whose boyfriend doesn't know and tells her to please stand up straight, and then you had a class where the professor's fly was open and either he did know it or he didn't—and each way was horrible; and then, instead of going to French Lit after lunch, you went to sleep and missed a spot quiz; and then at tennis class the gym teacher told you to think of the ball as a Communist and give it a real, honest-to-God smash; and then you ate a sticky supper and afterwards sat up till midnight talking about cancer and then writing this letter and being tired and, somehow, incomplete: is that what you did? Did you open up every moment of your life? Could you love anyone *that* much—to tell them everything and yet to tell them nothing?)

Bradley: (squeezing Nicky's fingers, clutched on his knee) You are the most beautiful girl I've ever known.

Nicky: Oh Bradley, I'm not.

Bradley: But you are, Nicky. Please don't laugh at me, Nicky, but I'm terribly in love with you. Don't laugh at me; I can't help it.

Nicky: Why should I laugh at you, Bunny? (Wanting desperately to say "love" too but feeling it stick.)

Bradley: Can you tell me, dearest? Can you say you love me—just a little, even?

Nicky: (finally dislodging it, like phlegm) I do love you. (And suddenly feeling something flying away from her.)

Bradley: Good God, Nicky Hapgood, you make me so happy. You are the joy of my life.

They embrace.

I find that I cannot write any more of this: you get the idea. There was never anything humorous or playful between us; our love was eternal, serious, for keeps, etc. With Bradley love is one hundred per cent love. Inside his head is a chipped record that sings love is love is love is love is love is love is love and so forth, till death does him part from his love.

What my record plays I'm not sure of even yet. I cannot hear it all the time or even every time I want to. It plays, I think, many things.

IX

BRADLEY AND I, thereupon, began what is known as a sizzling correspondence. I admit that from a distance I really believed I was in love with him (I'm not *all* a mask) and I found that going out with other boys was not much fun. I kept comparing them to Bradley and they always came in second: conceited or posturing or dumb or out, simply, for one roll in the hay. At the time I thought this proved that Bradley was really special and that the other men were an unusually dreary bunch. Now I realize that my judgment was faulty. The way it operated was that Bradley, lurking in the background like a second conscience, made it impossible for me to let myself go. And more: he became my handy excuse, at this point, for not exploring life, sex, love, etc., with other men. I was, in short, an emotional as well as a physical virgin. And the aspect about all this that burns me most is that, on looking back, I can see, with sickening clarity, that some of those other men were absolutely great. God, I was a sad case.

Bradley knew I was dating because I had promised him that if I did I would tell him about it; and a curious compulsion made me keep my promise scrupulously. In a way he was like a parent to whom you feel obliged to confess—both the important and the unimportant. I would end a typical letter:

"I went to the movies with a Harvard man last night. Did you

realize that not all Harvard men are gentlemen? But, my sweet, rest assured that all Red Ridge girls are perfect ladies—at least the ones you know and love.

“I’m sending you three special kisses in this letter—XXX—please be careful when refolding the paper.”

And his answer: “I’m glad, Nicky dove, that you are having a good time at school; I would hate to have you sit in your room every night, like a widow, denying yourself pleasure because of me. And remember, sweetest girl, that you don’t have to assure me you are being faithful: I know you are and always will be because you are my girl, MY WIFE.”

In a way, my reproducing Bradley’s letters like this is unfair to their author because Bradley is at his very worst in print. Whatever lightness of tone he has is utterly silenced by his prose. He sounds like a prim old man. On the other side: I promised to tell everything and since so much of my romance with Bradley operated by mail, his letters are important. I mean they show how little discretion I had at the time. I actually looked forward to his letters and if, by some chance, I failed to find one in my mailbox (and this was a lapse in the postal services and not in Bradley) I would walk away with tears in my throat.

And as for that part about my being his wife, you can be sure he meant it symbolically for he had never suggested that we sleep together; in fact, he had written over and over again that we should wait until we were truly married before we “discover the ultimate joys in one another.”

When I was a very small child I used to sit and look at pictures in my books for a long time, waiting for the people or animals in them to move. I remember vividly my frustration when they didn’t. And I couldn’t seem to learn from experience: the next time I saw a picture I would stare at it for hours waiting for it to become animated. I imagine that’s part of the reason I like the movies so much.

Well, during my first year at college, I was seized with an idea

as tenacious and disturbing as my fantasies about the pictures. Maybe Marian Fisher and Tom Garringer put it into my head but anyway this was it: I wanted to sleep with a man. It was, furthermore, a wholly abstract idea for, aside from Bradley with whom distance and his temperament made it impossible, no one seemed to be a logical partner. But I guess I was fairly determined because after a time I managed it.

After it was over, however, I was ashamed with such an absolute, all-consuming shame that I could not view it as I should have: as a warning, as a bell-siren-lights-rockets warning to me not to marry Bradley, in fact to break off completely because I did not love him enough.

One Monday night in February, just as winter was dropping her last devastating snowfall all over the Red Ridge campus and the girls in Constance were stumbling back to their rooms, having downed a typical Red Ridge dinner (frankfurters, beans, brown bread, white bread, rolls, ice cream, cookies), the girl on phone duty ran up to me and told me, happily (for we pooled our pleasures in college), that there was a man on the phone for me. It was not Bradley's night to call. No, he had not given his name but had asked, simply, for Miss Hapgood. Hurry.

It turned out to be a very sexy voice belonging to someone named Farley Button, identified as a friend of a friend from home and an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital. Would I please, because he had heard what an agreeable and pretty girl I was and because he had just survived three terrible days of exams, go out with him tonight and help him celebrate?

This Farley Button was smooth—even over the phone his voice sort of flowed like fudge sauce—and I didn't even stop to consider whether I ought to go out on a Monday night and, more to the point, whether I ought to go out with someone who sounded so "fatal," but said "sure, where, when, wait for me" as soon as he stopped talking. It was that peculiar time of the year when the season imposes a slowdown and you go along doing the same things in the same mood day after day until you could swear

nothing will ever alter, the season, the wind, the dreary awakenings into eternal, gray seven-thirties. No, there was one thing that perhaps made me say yes to Mr. Button a little more quickly. The week before I had had an infected wisdom tooth removed and, while the actual extraction had not been so bad, I was now suffering the agonies of the damned: the gum was taking a long time to heal and tiny sharp bits of bone came painfully to the surface and kept biting my tongue. It hurt with a constant brilliance in spite of large quantities of Anacin and I had begun to feel that I did not deserve this, that something was owed me for all this pain I was so nobly bearing up under. If I went out and had a good time the tedium and the toothache might vanish together. I agreed to take the bus into Boston. Mr. Button would meet me at the terminal. And how would I know him?

"My dear girl, don't you worry your pretty blond head about that (it is blond, isn't it?). I'll recognize you."

I was skeptical but I needn't have been; he didn't keep me waiting a second.

Farley Button was so attractive, so tall, so breezy, so pleasant, and so sure of himself that my Bradley bobbed once, like a drowning swimmer, on my horizon and dipped forever out of sight—at least until the next morning, when it was too late. By that time IT had happened.

Farley Button was almost maniacally cheerful; I guess he figured he'd done well enough on his examinations and would easily make Resident in any hospital he chose. His hands were all over me right off, but not in any way I could object to: he was just very gay and very physical and I caught his mood, thrown to me rather like a colored handkerchief. I was more than willing to go along with him in an intimacy which was ridiculous, considering our circumstances.

When I slip, it isn't a simple stumble; it's falling down the sheer face of the Matterhorn. Before I'd taken my first swallow I felt drunk. And then I started talking to myself: I had failed (my silent conversation began) to make proper use of that considerable

part of me which was unique, that is, my grand potential for pleasure and the ability to prolong sensation. Here, before me and beside me, was my moving picture in the flesh: he could show me how it was. I loved him, desperately, for knowing me for what I was and for what I hid. Farley Button would liberate the true Nicky Hapgood by screwing her—for that was, baldly, what it was: a screwing though not, I confess, a one-sided screwing.

Mr. Button said: "There's a neat little place over near the Fenway where they've got a Haitian drummer slaps heaven out of a bongo. Would you like to go listen for a while?"

"Sure," I said. I was by then some kind of medical phenomenon of sheer goose flesh.

We got into a taxi and rode to a tiny night club, downstairs in what seemed an office building. The room was like the inside of a blue balloon, very dark and almost round and the walls shimmered like stretched rubber. I was entranced (I mean that literally) by The Blue Room. It made me feel strange but also part of the world. And oh, I loved Farley Button's marvelous warm smile and his large slender hands and his smell.

I can't honestly remember what we talked about. I think he tried to talk about me and I about him. But I want to underline this: neither of us was committed, in any real way, to the other. We sat on different stools in front of different easels, poised above different arrangements. For surely he dreamed of a life among the cultures and I dreamed of a life in the midst of life and we both knew we had nothing, ultimately, to do with one another. It was, as the song says, just one of those nights.

We had not been sitting there very long (Farley B. had ordered me Scotch and the waiter had brought it without asking my age) when the drummer, Meegee, appeared from behind a crepe palm. He wore a satin blouse, crimson and with air-filled sleeves like an acrobat's and tight black pants under which you could see his parts, flattened and bulging. He was old, though, maybe sixty. He sat down, stiffly, on a stool, propped his drum between his knees, and, with a three-piece band humming behind him, started

stroking the drum. Then he increased the tempo a little. Then faster. Then still faster. Then the other instruments stopped. The lights in the room went out. A single spot embraced his hands and the drum's blank white face. Meegee went way out, or way back maybe, and his spirit disappeared into the voodoo night and his body remained in front of us hitting and pounding and stroking that drum with such incredible speed that his fingers flashed like bird's wings and the sound moved through and around the tiny room like air until you thought the walls would fall from the distending sounds for which there was no escape. And inside me, too, felt like bursting, for the sound and its echo filled my stomach until I thought I'd scream if he didn't stop. And cry if he did.

Finally he stopped. And what remained in me was the beat, silent but huge, and I started to fidget and drank my drink quickly and smiled a lot and eventually got frightened and then gradually I subsided in acquiescence. The whole gamut.

Farley Button had not led me into The Blue Room by accident. He had it made from the moment we entered. And he didn't even know about my toothache.

After we left Farley said, as we stood on the sidewalk and huddled into our coats against the wind, "Don't you Red Ridge girls turn into pumpkins or something at midnight?" He looked at his watch.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty-five. Can you manage an hour more?" He said it casually but I knew he was counting on me.

"I'll try," I answered, ready to lie or steal or endanger the lives of thousands for the sake of a couple of hours.

We found an open drugstore and I went into a phone booth and closed the door and put in a call to my housemother at Red Ridge and when she answered I asked her if I could have my late, late, one-a-term one-thirty permission that night.

"Nicky dear," she said, "where are you?"

"I'm in Boston, Mrs. Marsh. I'll be back before one-thirty."

"It is not customary to ask for a one-thirty permission at this

hour, Antoinette. I really should say no." She sounded very satisfied.

I held my breath a moment. I wanted to murder her, the old bat, but I had to be sweet and respectful or she'd have me back at Red Ridge as quick as you could say "no petting on the campus." Mrs. Marsh was, for this delicate moment, God.

"You have a very good record, Nicky. You haven't been late once. You may stay out. But remember, the consequences of a dishonored one-thirty are most serious."

After Mrs. Marsh had given me the permission, the suggestion of regret, like the drone of a mile-high plane, passed over my head and then was silent. It was only a flash but it made me wonder. This was the strangest situation: one minute I was pleading with a virtual stranger to be allowed to stay up past my usual bedtime and the next minute I would be hopping into bed with another virtual stranger.

We walked a few blocks to an apartment building. "This is my cousin's place," Farley told me as he turned a key into the front door lock. "He's in Texas. He's always either in Texas or the Bahamas."

"What does he do?" I asked, relieved to find us pausing at neutral territory.

"He's just very rich, that's what he does. He's a noncommercial traveler."

It was an elegantly furnished two rooms and kitchen but I had a hard time making out its details; there seemed to be a curious lack of illumination, even after Farley had switched on the lights.

Farley Button made me a drink (I still don't know why he bothered) and put a record on the phonograph. It was something by Prokofiev, early and melodic. He pointed to a couch, inviting me to sit on it, then sat down next to me. I wondered vaguely how much of the rent on the apartment Mr. Button contributed himself. It hardly seemed to matter.

Mr. Button started to kiss me and after a while (a short short

while) he simply scooped me up in his arms like a bundle of logs for the fireplace, carried me into the bedroom, and dropped me gently onto the bed—the double bed.

Then we did what I had never done before. I thought: this is the most fun I have ever had. It was marvelous, it was like a violent, gay dream of supremacy. I expected some sort of fumbling or maybe even pain. There was none. It was just great and fun and really happy.

Then I heard Farley Button say, "Oh Jesus God, it came off."

"What?" I asked, half there, sleepily playing with his lovely fingers.

"The rubber, darling."

"Oh my God," I said and sat up. I knew just enough to realize that this might be disastrous.

I am very certain that as we got dressed again and put on our winter coats and drove in a cab to the bus station and waited beneath a silent and pretty flurry of snow, we did not once look at one another. Farley seemed subdued and tired. He scratched his head and blew his nose a couple of times and then, just before I got on the bus, he smiled at me once—exactly the way a man in a train would smile at a small child who is leaning over the back of the seat in front of him.

As he handed me onto the steps he said, "May I see you again, Nicky?"

I said, "I don't know. Call me." He waved to me from the empty platform. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes to one; I might make it back on time.

Farley Button did call me, a few days later. I was still in terrible suspense, fearing what I assumed was a justifiable pregnancy, certain that as God made little apples he was making a little baby inside of me. I told myself that this was my punishment but I couldn't get used to the idea. It turned out I was just late but I wouldn't know that for four more days.

I said to Farley when he called that I would see him again but that I couldn't ever sleep with him again.

"My dear girl," he said, "we don't have to talk about these things over the telephone. Let's go for a walk tomorrow—it's Saturday. Saturdays are very good for walking."

I said all right and took the bus and met him again. He walked me in the cold clear air by the Charles River until my face began to sting. I wanted desperately to talk to him about what we could do if I really were pregnant but I found I could not, no more than I could have discussed my own death with him. And he seemed to have forgotten! He didn't mention it once. Maybe this kind of emergency was an old story to him and he recognized that at this point there was only one thing to do: wait. At any rate he had changed for me, he was no longer a lover but a menace. He had ruined my entire life; a girl with an abortion was a girl with an irreparable wound. I built up quite a case for my destruction, I could see nothing beyond my terrible shame. And then he had the audacity, or confidence, or whatever it was, to invite me back to his "cousin's" apartment for some warmth and some tea.

I was surprised when he tried to argue me out of my refusal; but I made him, finally, understand that what had happened the other night was not going to be repeated and when, at last, he got this through his head, he grew restless and distracted and hurried to put me back on that awful bus.

That was it.

Farley Button had fed me something that I wasn't ready to digest. If I'd been sensible, I'm positive I would never have got into the fantastic mess I got into later. The amazing and shameful thing is that I thought I couldn't see Farley Button again not because he wasn't exactly the nicest person, but because I was practically engaged to Bradley Evers!

X

IF YOU RECOGNIZE Red Ridge's basic character, you must admit that it was a tolerable place to be stuck for two years. While we girls were not especially serious about academic things, we showed up in class, did our assignments, and kept a fairly happy face on the educational side of our activities. The college authorities had seen to it that winter evenings, so long and suggestive, were crammed with culture: a lecture series by visiting poets, toting poems with them like gewgaws for our breathless inspection (once a colossally drunk poet—*not* Dylan Thomas—showed up and showered sparks of life all over the student body and the next Sunday in chapel we heard a sermon on the evils of electricity), monthly; a series of concerts by peripatetic string quartets, four times a year; a series of lectures by "Younger Statesmen" who read speeches with their long noses roosting over the lectern and who escaped immediately after their address, three times a year; and a series of old movies from the Boston Film Society, once every three weeks and by far the biggest draw.

My best friend at Red Ridge was Mary Mistenburgh. Mary, of all the girls I've ever known, is most like me. She even looks like me; people have mistaken us for sisters. Only Mary recognized in me this thing about feeling different but not wanting to show it

and she let it alone, respected it. And although God knows we talked enough about private things, she was never tactless.

Her family are beer. Her father's old man made a killing in it way back in the last century. Mary won't touch it. She used to tell me some absolutely hair-curling stories about the Mistenburghs—they all would make a dandy cast for a popular novel except that nobody would believe in them. Just to give you an indication of some of the things Mary had to get used to as a child in her immediate family: infidelity, alcoholism, miscegenation, (an uncle of Mary's married an octoroon and was drummed out of the Mistenburgh corps), sadism, homosexuality, and insanity. "Everything but epilepsy," she said, bugging her eyes and going rigid.

I was astonished, at first, at the casual way she spoke about these horrors but it didn't take long for me to realize that she had indeed been scarred: there was, in her eyes, the look of terror you sometimes see in rabbits. Say they are nibbling peacefully on cabbage leaves and suddenly they hear a noise and they look up at you and there it is, swimming in their tiny pink eyes.

And yet, Mary had survived—and more: she had somehow pointed herself in the right direction. Far more than I, she knew where she was going.

Mary lived down the hall from me, on the other side of Marian Fisher. The three of us would huddle every night after we finished studying (it was fairly easy to get your work done by ten o'clock unless it was something extraordinary) and talk until one of us fell asleep right where we were sitting, which was usually in my room. Talk was our stimulus and our drug even though it was ninety-five per cent about ourselves. Marian was an English major and wrote a short story every week. Mary Mistenburgh was just waiting out Red Ridge until she could go to Radcliffe and really study art history. She wanted, eventually, to work for a large museum; her walls were hidden by reproductions of paintings. And, of course, all of us wanted to be married. Marian to Tom Garringer, me to Bradley, and Mary to a man she had not yet

met. The funny thing is that Mary is the only one of us who is married today.

College made less impression on me than school had. I imagine this is because, when you are young, time stretches endlessly through fall-winter-spring, and everything seems to take longer to happen, sort of slow-motion. And each time you are confronted by something new you are indented, like a lump of wet clay, by the finger of reality. After a while you begin to harden with these dents in you and by the time you reach eighteen or twenty you have so many cavities that there is very little room left for more; and besides, you are now so firm that you can be altered only by the greatest pressure.

Perhaps I was smoothed somewhat while I was at Red Ridge, but I was essentially the same Nicky Hapgood when I finished.

Mary, like Florence Goldwater, whom I met, soberly, from time to time in Boston for an afternoon of shopping or museuming, forced me to think. Peculiar as it is, it was my contemporaries, far more than my parents, who tried to convince me that God gave me a head to use in other ways than simply as a site for my pretty, stupid face. The work that Florence started, Mary continued: I'm still not sure why they considered it a worthwhile project.

I'd told Mary all about Bradley but she felt she knew him through his letters rather than from anything I said. For a long while she made no comment, merely listening as I read from the letters. Then one night when Marian was not there she said to me, "Are you really going to marry Bradley?"

"Of course I am."

"Oh."

"Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered," she said. "You don't know him very well, do you." It was more a statement than a question.

"I think I know him very well."

"What," Mary said, "does your father think of Bradley?"

"Well, he's never actually met him. But he knows Bradley's

family, or used to know them. And I think on the whole, he approves. Of course," I admitted, "he doesn't realize quite how serious we are and I really don't see why I should tell him at the moment—there's absolutely no point in it, I mean with neither of us finished school." I felt myself backing myself into a nasty corner.

Mary scratched at her wrist and then sucked on it as if it had a smear of honey on it. Then she inspected it and tucked it under her other one, on her lap. Her mouth remained closed but her features were all too expressive. They said: "I am skeptical of this whole Bradley business."

To be perfectly honest, the subject of Bradley and me was not one I would have chosen to explore with Mary for I knew she could better me. She could have bettered me even if I *had* had a strong leg to stand on.

I liked being secretly engaged, I liked the satisfying feeling of "having" someone who wrote me daily and who helped me remain a "good girl." I was uncertain but perfectly willing to keep us both suspended like identical frogs waiting for spring and our new legs. The only difference between Bradley and me was that he was being fooled and only I knew it. And still I would have died rather than admit it outright to myself, let alone to Mary Mistenburgh.

"And what does your mother think?"

"I don't know what she thinks. I guess she thinks it's just dandy. She's always told me I was the kind of girl who ought to marry someone who had as much money as Daddy, she's said it joking but I know damn well she means it. She thinks I have no 'inner resources,' as she puts it, and she wants me to be comfortable and looked after."

"I'd like to meet your mother," Mary said.

"You will. Anyway, since Bradley's future is all neatly settled into his father's business, Mother's probably relieved that I won't have to sit on the shelf and she can turn me over to the Evers family without having to worry about whether I have the proper

coats and enough silk underwear and all that jazz. Mother doesn't like to worry; it gives her wrinkles."

"Then your mother does know you're really serious?"

"I guess she does, though I've never told her about us, in so many words. She's a superior snoop: she knows what she's looking for even before she finds it."

(It just this minute occurred to me: Mummy has always given me this big line about how when a man and woman are happily married they tell each other *everything*. But if that's true then how come Mother was wise to me and Bradley and Daddy wasn't? Just one of those little mysteries of life.)

"You haven't really been with many men," Mary bored in some more. "What makes you so sure Bradley's The One?"

"I'm just sure, that's all," I said, snippy. "Now let's talk about something else." I lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the wastebasket. Mary's eyebrows shot up like two frightened little birds, so I went over to the basket and shuffled around in the papers until I found the match. It was out. God knows I didn't want to set any fires at Red Ridge. It was my home away from home.

Reluctant as I was to have Mary and Bradley meet, there was no way out of it; he was coming up for Founder's Ball. Founder's Ball is the big dance of the year, held on the anniversary of the founder's marriage. It sounds like a silly reason to have a dance but that's the way things were at Red Ridge. You know, like "there's no reason for it; it's our policy."

The dance was late in March, about a month after my encounter with Farley Button. I was still shaky from that and from the nasty little pregnancy scare that followed it. I'd also been dreaming fairly regularly about Farley, dreams of him and me in various interesting, i.e., sexual, situations and I was naïvely determined to have Bradley appear and stop all the nonsense. I'd actually convinced myself that the dreams were caused by *Bradley's* absence.

Because the college authorities know what goes on during a

week end like Founder's, attendance at Hygiene A is made compulsory during the winter term and its classes are chiefly devoted to the mechanics and the morals of sex. Mary and I were mad because we thought lectures in morality should be delivered in Chapel and not in the classroom, but we eventually developed a more tolerant attitude. Mary said, "They're just hedging their bets. The most important thing is we shouldn't get knocked up. Right? So they appeal to some of us by this moral stuff. But they know damn well most of us won't buy it so they make good and sure we know how to keep out of trouble. You can't blame them."

I was delighted when in Hygiene class one day we were shown by slides how "married women practice birth control" followed by a twenty-minute sermon on why men truly respect and want for their wives, girls who keep themselves intact for the bridal bed. I wondered what Daddy would have to say about the elegant hypocrisy in all *that*.

The only thing they neglected to tell us was how to obtain the diaphragms. So the lectures were really wasted.

Bradley drove up with Tom Garringer again; this time they were old pals; you know, they had a comic routine worked up, Tom cracking the jokes and Bradley playing his straight man and they had bought identical striped stocking caps with pom-poms. The Bobbsey twins. (An irrelevant but irritating side light of the week end was that Tom got Marian put on probation for the rest of the year by leaving a whisky bottle in her coat pocket, where it was sniffed out by the housemother during a secret inspection tour Sunday evening when we were all at supper.)

Friday night, after Bradley had deposited his bags in his hotel room, I met him in Boston and we had one of those long evenings made up of sighs and attempts at speech. In the first place, he took me to one of the noisiest places I've ever been in: the Merry-Go-Round Room at the Sheraton-Plaza. They have this round bar which rotates slowly while waiters hop on and off serving drinks. I should think it would discourage people from having another

but it doesn't seem to. I saw too many familiar faces; it was the place to go that year and everyone thought he had to scream or he wouldn't have a good time.

In the second place, there were too many things on my mind to make talking easy. There was Farley Button (who wouldn't seem to go away) and there were misgivings about Bradley, hundreds of them.

Bradley shouted, "Nicky, you look beautiful. I'd forgotten."

"You had?"

"Well, no, actually I didn't forget but your picture doesn't do you justice." He looked pleased, as if he'd said something original and perceptive. "Like it here?" He toyed with my fingers on the shiny black table. His hand was slightly moist. But his eyes were so sweet.

I nodded. "It's kind of noisy."

"You can say that again," he said, not appearing to find this a shortcoming. "My God, Nicky, I've missed you like crazy." He moved his chair a little closer to mine. "The fellows think I'm some kind of nut, writing you every day, but it just seems like I've got to tell you everything that happens, and everything I'm thinking about, which is mostly you—as you know."

"You tell your friends how often you write me? I hope you don't also show them my letters. By the way, who are the fellows?"

"Oh, Tommy, a couple of other guys. Listen, Nicky, you don't really think I would show your letters around, do you?" I had hurt his feelings.

"No, of course I don't, silly. Only girls do things like that." I was teasing him but he didn't take it that way and finally, to keep him from having a fit, I lied to him by swearing I had never shown *his* letters to a soul.

After I'd convinced him that our correspondence was top secret, Bradley wanted to talk about Mummy and Daddy. It seemed his father had started reminiscing about the good old days at good old Eli, the gay old times with Nicholas Hapgood. He'd whetted

Bradley's appetite for Daddy. But it was more than that: Bradley wanted to be part of the Hapgood family.

"Tell me about your little brother," Bradley said.

"He'd kill you if he heard you calling him that," I said, for the first time realizing how humiliating it must be for younger brothers and sisters to be referred to as "little." Especially, as in our case, when the little is a foot and a half taller than the big.

"Well," I said, "Danny's sort of an individual. He's got his own ideas about things. I think he wants to be a journalist, the thinking kind. You know, more of a political and social critic than just a reporter."

"You mean like Drew Pearson?"

"Well, I don't think so, not exactly," I said.

"He sounds okay," Bradley said.

"He is. Except when he gets it into his head that he knows all the answers and everybody else is some kind of moron."

"Oh, all kid brothers are like that. Wick too." Bradley had a younger brother, Wickersham; that made us both experts. We talked about brothers for a while and then Bradley edged back toward my parents again, as if they were an island on which he had to make a landing. "I wish I could meet them," he said.

For some reason this made me go all prickly.

"There's plenty of time," I said.

"I guess you're right, honey," Bradley said, "but it's too bad they won't be here this week end."

"Are you kidding?" I just couldn't believe it; most boys went through all kinds of maneuvers trying to escape their girl's parents. And here was Bradley, wanting to include them on one of the rare occasions he could be alone with me.

"Only half kidding," he said. "I guess I'm just anxious to let them have a look at their future son-in-law. If you must know, I want them to like me—it's very important to me. I don't go for all that jazz where kids make it a point not to speak to their folks. I think that's for the birds. I mean here your parents go and devote most of their adult lives to bringing you up and then you turn

around and just walk out for good; what kind of gratitude is that?"

"I feel exactly the same way you do," I said. "But I'm sure Mummy and Daddy will like you. Why shouldn't they?"

"How about Danny?" Bradley asked, with a rare show of prescience.

I shrugged and lied again. "What does it matter? You're not planning to marry him, are you? Let's go somewhere else, Bunny, this noise is impossible." It was really our conversation that I found impossible. But I was too stupid about myself to recognize the signs of growing doubt in me; I blamed my impatience on the noise.

One thing about Boston: you don't get a lot of smoke and soot like you do in New York and other big cities. And when there are no clouds and you look up, at night, the sky is crammed full of stars, lavish and bright, like the sparkles in a cheap bracelet. And when the sky is like that it makes you want to be quiet—and listen. I was so glad to get away from the bedlam of the Merry-Go-Round Room of the Sheraton-Plaza and out under the sky, cold as the air was, that I was suddenly filled with hope. I wanted so desperately to love Bradley the way he loved me.

Then I had a crazy idea: If I knew Bradley better, knew him physically, that is, I would certainly love him more. The fault lay not in my knowing him too well but in knowing him not well enough.

"Bunny, how far away is your hotel?"

"Oh, just a couple of blocks from here. Why?"

"Could we go there?"

"What do you want to go *there* for? It's just a dump. It doesn't even have a cocktail lounge."

I was amazed he could be so thick. Our exchange reminded me of me and Farley; with the roles unhappily reversed. Why couldn't Bradley be the enticer?

"I'd like to see your room," I said with some difficulty. "Can I see your room?"

Bradley looked at me as if I'd just suggested we go somewhere and take dope for a while.

"I think they've got house detectives patrolling the joint," he said. "I doubt if I could sneak you in."

"Couldn't we just try? It would be exciting just trying to see if we could do it."

"Nicky, listen honey, I don't want you to get in any trouble. Supposing you were found in my room?"

"Okay, what would happen?"

"A thousand to one your parents would hear about it. It would be an awful mess. It's not worth it, believe me, Nicky."

I just couldn't persuade him; he was as determined as I was. We were getting cold, standing there in faded old Copley Square. I felt, suddenly, isolated and homeless. There was no place we could go for privacy, let alone intimacy (which was apparently out of the question anyway). Bradley did not feel stranded but I did. I hated needing something so badly and not even being able to get near enough to touch it.

The next night was the big dance. While I was standing in front of my closet mirror, more concerned with calming the butterflies in my stomach than with how I looked, Mary came into the room and lowered herself onto a chair as gingerly as if she were a ticking bomb.

"Christ, I can't breathe," she whispered.

"Why not?" I said, buttoning the last tiny satin button and erasing my image by shutting the closet.

"Got talked into buying one of these waist-cincher things; seems to be choking off the air."

"Loosen it," I said.

"Can't," she said, "only has one hole."

"Take it off then."

"Can't. Dress won't fit. Oh, vanity, vanity." Mary really did look as if someone were choking her. I laughed; I felt a little better.

Mary took as deep a breath as she could and smiled at my smile and said, "Well, when do I get to meet him?"

"Soon enough. Do my bra straps show in back?" I asked.

"No. Hey, that's really gorgeous, Nicky, where from?"

"I forget. New York, I guess."

Mary tried to find the label down my back. "I don't know," she said. "Some girls just seem to have it made. Dresses from Bergdorf's, handsome men, oodles of talent, long fingernails. Bradley coming at eight-thirty?"

"Yes. How about your date? What's his name again?"

"Gerald Bonnet. He sounds plausible but I wish I knew what he looked like."

"Well, he probably wishes he knew what you looked like so you're even."

"Oh, for a Bradley in my life," she said. I knew damn well she didn't really mean it and I thought she was pouring it on a bit thick and I was just about to tell her so when someone yelled down the hall: "Nicky Hapgood's date's here!"

Dear Mary came downstairs with me.

At the foot of the stairs I introduced Bradley to Mary. "Hi," Mary said, pretending not to be examining him.

Bradley said "How-do-you-do Miss Mistenburgh," and shook her hand. Then he pushed a shiny white florist's box at me and I had to open it. Inside were (naturally) two gardenias, still white and smelling like an entire bottle of drugstore cologne had just spilled all over the place. I pinned them on but I also pricked my finger and smudged some blood on my dress, right in front. "Damn," I said. Bradley looked pained.

Mary tried to make small talk with Bradley but failed and *finally* her Mr. Bonnet, with his glasses and tiny chin showed up to square our awkward triangle. Then, prodded by me, we split up and drifted over to the gym for the dance.

"Your friend Mary seems sort of childish," Bradley said.

"Really? I always thought she was particularly mature."

The dance was mobbed. My mother's always telling me about

how in *her* day (was it *her* day? time isn't possessed: it possesses you), there was a stag line at every dance and the object was to have as many men cut in on you as possible; the more men you danced with, the better for your reputation as a charmer. All the dances I've ever gone to (except the Evers' engagement party for Bradley and me) the exact opposite happened: you and your original partner stayed together as if you were tied to each other by a rope. Bradley was a pretty fair dancer and I began, almost, to enjoy myself, when I saw Farley Button.

It was just a glimpse, at first, from across the floor, but his unmistakable ears and hairline started my stomach flopping, my face burning, and my heart accelerating so loud and strong that I was positive Bradley would notice. My legs turned to spaghetti and I tripped over Bradley's feet.

"Sorry," he said.

"Oh, no, it was my fault." I was terribly upset. And then horrified that the sight of Farley Button could make me feel faint. What was going on?

I was desperate to discover who Farley was with. And apparently he wanted to get a look at me for soon he danced himself over to us. His date was an extremely attractive, dumb-type blonde whom I'd seen around but didn't know. (I later found out her name was Sally Blake and she came from Bronxville and was majoring in Art History but it didn't help.)

"Hello, Miss Hapgood," Farley said over the shoulder of Miss Sally Blake, "keeping warm these days?" And then he melted back into the mob.

"Who was *that*?" Bradley asked.

"Oh, one of those boys I wrote you about. He was horrid, he tried to force me to kiss him in a taxi right after I told him I was practically engaged."

"What did he mean about keeping warm?"

"I really don't know *what* he was talking about. I think he likes to be mysterious. Let's just forget him."

But I couldn't. My evening, my week, my world was ruined.

The next day, Sunday, something unbelievable happened: my parents showed up. With Danny. You see, they hadn't known it was Founder's week end. I mean even if they were keeping tabs on me you could hardly expect them to remember every little piss-pot event at Red Ridge. They simply chose that Sunday to decide that it was about time they put in an appearance. I still think—being quite convinced about the power of the mind to influence action—that it was Bradley who got them there by wishing them there.

Bradley and I had gone for breakfast to the on-campus College Spa. The College Spa is where you went when you couldn't stand the dining-room food any more. It was expensive, it was a cafeteria, and even Duncan Hines wouldn't have recommended the food, but you could smoke and you didn't have to say grace before you sat down so we all ate there from time to time. That Sunday morning everyone and her date was there. Like the dance, it was mobbed. A few girls were trying very hard not to look hung-over. But even though I hadn't had a drink I felt curiously like the morning after: light-headed, dopey, with a persistent nausea dancing around and exploring the pit of my stomach. Bradley ate a huge breakfast of wheat cakes and sausages and was very talkative. I sipped some tea, slowly and carefully. The idea that this sweet goony boy sitting opposite me, pouring just a little more syrup over his pancake, would (if events kept to their course) be sitting opposite me at all the breakfasts for the rest of my life I never permitted to penetrate my emotional skin. If I had, I probably would have jumped out of my chair—spilling things of course—and said something highly dramatic (but really true) like:

"Bradley, this is crazy. It can't go on. I don't love you enough to eat breakfast with you forever. I can't even bear to watch the way you wipe your mouth *now* (he sort of patted it, like a woman applying powder), how will I be able to stand it in a *year*?"

But, as usual, I made excuses for the way I was feeling. I blamed my irritation on my upset stomach and on the fact that

I was expecting my period any day. It was always something; I rationalized like crazy.

Bradley finished eating and we walked back from the Spa. He asked me about my classes and told me about his, how he was having a rough time with Physics and so forth. But it didn't really matter because he was going to work for his old man, and right in the middle of this sad recital I got my second ghastly shock in twenty-four hours: I saw Daddy's car parked alongside the path.

"Oh my God," I said.

"What's the matter, Nicky?"

"I think I see our car."

"Really? Where?" Bradley was delighted.

"That one, the black Buick, the polished one. I guess they're here."

Bradley actually said "Terrific! Do you think they know I'm here? I mean do they know you have a date this week end?"

"I don't know," I said. "Probably not."

At that moment Danny strolled out through the front door of Constance, his hands in his flannels, no coat of course, with a spiffy brown tweed jacket I'd never seen before and his hair a little longer than usual. He stared with open admiration at one of my classmates and held the door open for her as she went into the dorm. She didn't say thank you but he smiled at her anyway.

"There's Danny," I said weakly.

"That kid?"

"Yes. Come on." I ran ahead of Bradley and came up to my brother and said "Hi, Danny, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, Mom and Dad dragged me along to see you. I tried to make them call you first but they wanted to surprise their little girl. That jazz." Danny really seemed pretty happy to see me.

Bradley was hanging back but there was no avoiding an introduction.

"Bradley, come over and meet my brother. Danny, this is Bradley Evers."

"Hi there, Danny," Bradley said, sticking out a great friendly hand.

"I didn't quite catch the name," Danny said, shaking. He *had* caught the name, he was just being shitty. There's one thing about Danny. He'll just *have* to get over making instantaneous judgments about people. I mean how could he tell, right off the bat, what Bradley was like? And what gave him the right to decide not to be nice to a certain kind of person?

Bradley, politely, repeated his name.

And Danny said, "Will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Will you ever?"

"That depends," Bradley said from the back of his throat. He knew Danny was giving him a hard time. And that's saying something because on-the-spot insight is not Bradley's strongest point.

I was just getting into a snit and wondering how to break them up tactfully, when Daddy walked out of Constance.

"Princess!" he called, seeing me. "How's my girl?" He loped over and opened his arms for a hug. I would have been thrilled to see him under any other circumstances. But I hugged him dutifully anyway and, for a moment, hid my face from the world against his warm chest, smelling his cigarettes and leather eyeglass case and his own peculiar smell and wishing desperately that I could just stay there, but knowing there were certain things I had to perform or he would be ashamed of me.

So I stepped back and introduced Bradley to Daddy.

"How are you, Mr. Evers," Daddy said. "Squired my daughter to the big dance, eh? Nicky dear, your mother and I just found out what an important week end this is. I'm sorry, you two, if we've spoiled your party."

"Oh, no sir, not at all," Bradley said. "As a matter of fact, I was saying to Nicky just the other night, how swell it would be if you and Mrs. Hapgood could be here too."

For a second Daddy's face clouded over, then he smiled at Bradley and said "Really?"

"Oh, yes sir."

A natural alliance had formed, just as with Danny a natural antipathy.

Enter Mother. I mean really, if this had been a scene in a play, the characters couldn't have made their entrances at a dramatically more interesting moment. One, two, then three. It was interesting all right, but just too sticky for me. And Danny's face said that he was about to give in either to amusement or to disgust.

Mother was wearing a red wool suit and a gray cape with a red wool lining. I thought she looked like a witch and the cape made me self-conscious for her sake though she didn't seem to realize how strange she looked. Thinking back, maybe she didn't look strange at all, but all I could think of then was going somewhere my friends would not be apt to see her. But Daddy suggested a walk around the campus. Bradley walked eagerly with my parents; I fell back with Danny.

Danny told me a couple of crummy jokes and I asked him about school (he said that most of his courses were a snap but that the French teacher had it in for him and was making him do fifth year work while the rest of the class did fourth). Then he asked me to lend him five dollars. I told him I could only spare four. And he said "great." But he really wanted to talk about Bradley so he began asking me all these questions like how long had I known him, how often did I see him, what sort of books did he read. And then some questions I thought were pretty nervy like how was he in bed, which I naturally laughed off.

Meanwhile, I could see that Bradley and my parents were becoming what Danny would call ass-hole buddies. Daddy, who always before had been almost rude to my boy friends, was laughing and listening. I tried to attribute it to the fact that Daddy knew Mr. Evers, Sr., but that wasn't the whole of it. It was that natural alliance I mentioned.

Why, on seeing them together like that, I should then have

trembled is a credit only to my instinct. But instinct is not the same as good sense; you have to be wiser and looser than I was to let your instinct guide you. When I trembled (and it wasn't a physical shiver; it was a heart's shudder), I told myself it was part of the pain of becoming a woman.

Danny said, "Looks like your Bradley's got the old man hooked."

"I don't see how you can say that, just because they're having a perfectly normal, civilized conversation."

"Yup," Danny continued, "like I said, your boy friend's made a hit. What I can't figure out is what's his secret. Do you think it's that old Southern charm?"

"Danny, you're being stupid and childish. There's absolutely no reason why Bradley and Daddy shouldn't get on."

"No. Well, maybe so. Let's just wait and see."

Danny upset me badly but I wouldn't let on. It was somehow important that he should like Bradley—much more so than either Mummy or Daddy. You see Danny was the kind of person I always wanted to be (I don't think I ever, in my whole life, wanted to be like Mummy) and if Danny felt Bradley wasn't right for me then how could I?

I walked ahead of Danny and took Bradley's arm. "Let's go into Boston for lunch," I said. I thought food might make Danny feel better.

Daddy took over; he loves to buy dinner for a lot of people.

Mummy said "Where?" and Daddy and she got into one of their usual hassles about what kind of restaurant we ought to go to—not that there's so much to choose from in Boston. In the middle of it all, Bradley interrupted (very politely, of course) and said he'd heard of a fish place near the docks that was supposed to be very good and why didn't we try that and Daddy said "Splendid. Pile in, kids." He held the back door of the car open for us and we were off, with me in the middle, like Nehru flanked by Kennedy and Khrushchev, and trying to say only the most neutral things.

We had to wait almost an hour for a table.

Bradley was very embarrassed and kept suggesting that we leave but Daddy said no. The head waiter took Daddy's name and wrote it down in a ledger, steered us to the bar, and then apparently forgot about us. Daddy, who generally gets terribly impatient at having to wait, sat down on a stool and started buying Bradley drinks and continuing this palsy conversation. He offered Danny some sherry, which Danny accepted as a poor substitute for what he really wanted, and I still felt queasy but obliged to talk to Mummy to sort of keep things going between us. It was really pretty grim, that waiting. And when we finally sat down at a table by the window, overlooking the garbage and oil slicks in beautiful Boston Harbor, we discovered that neither the food nor the service was good. But Daddy acted as if we were at the Chambord and kept ordering extra things like wine and ice cream for the pie and so on and all the time he and Bradley were talking about Business and The Economy and Danny was happily making a little house out of sugar cubes, his face indicating he was far, far away. Mother was just smiling: she was off her feet and in front of a drink. Mother saw the future, I imagine, like a warm, comfortable blanket spread out on a damp beach, big enough to hold her and me and Bradley, with some room left for my children. Mother may be hard to take but I have to admit that she knows what she's after.

This was a time when it might still have been possible to extract myself but instead of being warned by my acuteness and discomfort, I was bewildered; I felt that tension must surely be a component of new love—or else why would I be feeling it? I felt that Danny's open hostility was quite natural (wasn't I fully prepared to loathe his girls?) and I was certain that what I have now come to think of as Bradley's Rabbitiness was his sweet goodness. What I failed to see—what Danny saw—was that Bradley would make a dandy husband—for someone who really loved him. And I didn't.

Danny managed to get me alone after we got back to Red Ridge. Bradley was off hunting for Tom Garringer and Daddy

and Mummy had gone over to see the Dean of Admissions about the daughter of one of Daddy's vice-presidents. I was sure Danny would be sarcastic again and was all prepared with the right smart answers when he surprised me by saying in his most serious manner, "Nicky, please take it easy."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I mean why don't you play the field a little while longer? Not just go out with one guy? You *are* going steady with Bradley Evers, aren't you?"

"I suppose so," I said, reminded of my little talks with Mary. It was amazing how both of them could make me so itchy.

"I wish I were the older one," Danny said. "Then you could go out with my friends."

For one split second I was ready to surrender to Danny. It would have meant drastic things: that I might fall victim to the Farleys instead of the Bradleys, that I would be alone again, that I would have to do some serious thinking about myself. I was almost ready. Danny stared at me so long and hard I thought his eyes would water. And then that warm blanket enclosed me, covering and calming me, and I slipped back. I would not change things, I could not risk it.

"I know, Danny dear, but since I'm the older that's clearly out of the question, isn't it? Anyway, your friends are too unreliable for my taste. I mean who wants to be engaged to a mountain climber?" (Danny's best friend spent his allowance and summer job salary on crampons and ropes every fall. This boy is now on his way to Nepal, having left a lonely girl somewhere on the West Coast, wondering if she'll ever see him again.)

"Okay, Nicky, it's your funeral."

Then I found I had to fight back; once my position was taken I had to defend it. I said a lot of nasty things to my brother such as I wished Mummy and Daddy hadn't brought him along and that he had a hell of a nerve always going around telling people how they ought to think and act and I told him he acted as if he thought his was ice cream.

I think I really hurt his feelings and I was sorry afterwards, when he was gone and it was too late. But *he* had hurt me more; he had prodded far into the wound already opened up by Mary Mistenburgh.

My friends.

Every spring at Red Ridge Junior College there's an Hellenic Festival and they arrange it so that you have to start planning as soon as Mid-terms are over in early February. This is supposed to occupy you, give you something to work for and be dedicated to, to strive towards, to give your all to, to engross you as if you'd spend all your time in bed masturbating if you didn't have something BIG like the Hellenic Festival to think about.

The work is done by committees, naturally. A Master Committee sits in prestigious inutility on top of the work heap (their only function being a choice of theme) while the other committees do all the work. For example, the Music Committee commissions and selects the music, the Costume Committee designs and makes the costumes, and the Judges Committee writes to poets, painters, dancers, and composers asking them to judge the Festival, gratis. Since the ratio of acceptances to refusals is about one in twenty-five, the Judges Committee must not only be the most imaginative but also the hardest working. At the bottom of the work pyramid are the drones who string lights, count paper napkins, and stitch hems.

The Festival at Red Ridge is serious business; the entire area is involved, in one way or another. The local Chamber of Commerce visibly perks up and the Boston papers send out reporters and photographers to cover the event. A "big deal" is what my brother Danny calls it although he was perfectly delighted to come and watch it two years in a row. The Festival itself takes an entire day, beginning with a Dance of the Dawn and building up to a Panathenaic Procession and the presentation to Athena of a saffron robe and an original play written for the occasion. Who will be Athena is always held top secret by Athena's Committee.

And it really is a secret: I did not find out I was to be the goddess until the night before.

Joannie Billings came to the door of my room about nine o'clock Festival eve of my senior year. I was doggedly sewing on my costume for my role as a sacrificial goat in the procession and muttering unpleasantly about having failed to land the leading role in the play; it was the first time that had ever happened and I hated it. Joannie was a Home Science major and I didn't know her very well though I had seen her pinched little face often enough.

"Hi, Nicky," she said, "may I come in?" She stood, the picture of self-confidence, in the doorway. She held a notebook in one hand, a pencil in the other. I knew something important was about to happen to me. Actually, I thought I would be asked to be a lesser god or goddess, like Hermes.

"Sure, Joannie," I said, "let me take these clothes off the chair." I threw them into my closet. Joannie sat down on the bed anyway and started talking to me about crepes suzette she had made in class that day, deliberately keeping away from what she had come in for, teasing me like a mean kitten. I was really wonderfully patient: I didn't let a thing show in my face or my voice, while inside I was trembling with suspense.

It seemed like about ten minutes passed before she finally came out with it—and then there was no beating about the bush:

"Listen, Nicky, the reason I'm here is we, that is Athena's Committee, have decided on you for Athena."

"You mean me?" I asked idiotically.

"Who else?" she said, the trace of hauteur in her voice thickening like yeast dough.

It irritates me to say so but I was almost speechless with pleasure. For no matter how foolish I found the whole Festival business, when you are chosen Athena you're it, you're in it, you're special; like artichoke hearts or May wine.

"Now, let's get down to brass tacks," Joannie said importantly, opening her notebook. "We got your measurements from the gym

department and we've had a gown made for you but you have to come with me right now and try it on to make sure it fits."

"Okay," I said, throwing aside my goat suit and jumping up. "Let's go."

As we walked across the campus to the gym, Joannie opened her notebook again and began reading to me. They had the mechanics of the procession perfected to half minutes. I listened very carefully. It boiled down to this: I would sit, looking wise and goddesslike, while the others performed the action.

It was obvious that the reason it was a simple matter to insert someone into the role of Athena without notice was that there was nothing for her to do. Athena was passive (though she might be inspirational); in the real Panathenaic Festival, on which ours was modeled, after all, the Athenians paraded in front of a marble statue. And still it was supposed to be an honor being chosen Athena, and your name was added to a list of previous Red Ridge Athenas, painted in gold leaf on a wooden shield tacked to the wall of the administration building.

We got to the gym before anyone else and Joannie took me to a locker and told me the dress was inside. As I put it on I could hear the others coming in, bringing their excited efficiency in with them. I wanted to make them wait for me, out of some buried spite, but I was too nervous. I finished changing my clothes and went out to the gymnasium proper, where they stood, Athena's Committee, in a circle under rope ladders and rings. The circle immediately enclosed me; I felt exactly like the sacrificial goat. On the other hand, I liked the gown I was wearing; it fell in heavy, soft folds of gray wool challis from two clasps, like two cold beetles, one on each shoulder, and met the floor extravagantly. Someone put a helmet on my head, one of those high rounded helmets with a six-inch mane of real black horse hair, smartly cropped, and fierce, down-turning eye-holes. Someone else thrust a spear, slenderly pointed, into my right hand. I was transformed. I *was* wisdom and purity.

Then Joannie said to Barbara Jameson, "She'll have to wash her hair."

And Barbara Jameson said to me, "You'll have to wash your hair. Can you tonight?" It wasn't actually a question.

"I can," I said, "but it may look awfully fluffy tomorrow."

"That's okay," Barbara said, "that's better than having it look stringy."

My hair never looks stringy, even when it needs washing; they were just trying to rub the sheen off my pleasure. But they couldn't because I was beginning to like being Athena.

When I got back to my dormitory, I put through a collect call home to tell them the news. I was terribly glad that Daddy answered the phone. I told him I had been selected as Athena and that meant I was the most beautiful at Red Ridge. He sounded pleased and proud and wanted to make sure I had everything I needed. (He didn't mean shoes or anything like that; he meant jewelry and said he was going to get his mother's diamond earrings out of his safe-deposit box early next morning and bring them along with him. He had an important meeting scheduled but he certainly would postpone it. Actually, I was not allowed to wear the jewels.) I must say, hearing Daddy go on like that made me hope that I wasn't just a dumb blonde but somehow worthy of exceptional allegiances.

And then I called Bradley at Georgia Tech. Bradley was as delighted as Daddy and said almost the identical things. Only the curious part of it was that as soon as Bradley became enthusiastic I began to get negative and play it down.

"Nicky," Bradley trilled, "how wonderful for you, darling. Athena." Everybody knows about Red Ridge's Festival; I didn't have to tell him what it was.

"It is kind of a nice surprise," I said, holding back.

"I'm not in the least surprised," Bradley observed.

"Oh Bunny, don't be silly. There are plenty of pretty girls here. In fact the place is lousy with them. They picked me 'cause they wanted someone who could act surprised and wouldn't stumble

over her train or mess things up generally. After all, I am the Bernhardt of Red Ridge." I wanted desperately for Bradley to be the one to acknowledge the absurdity of the whole thing but he couldn't. He saw things only one way.

"I wish I could be there when they present you with your robe, honey," he agonized. "God-dammit, I'm going to cut my exam and fly up."

"No, Bunny, don't. I'd feel just terrible if you didn't graduate on account of me." By way of one of those brilliant coincidences, Bradley would be taking his final exams just as we were killing off the lambs and quaffing our grape juice.

I was getting hot in the phone booth and its odor, an immemorial association of tobacco smoke and dirty hair, reminded me I ought to be in the shower that moment with a bottle of shampoo.

"I'll send Wick as my minister plenipotentiary, honey, I'll call him right now," Bradley said.

"All right," I said. "I love you, Bunny. Daddy will take lots of pictures for you. Good night, Bradley."

"Good night, darling. I'll be thinking of you every minute tomorrow. I know you'll be the most beautiful Athena," and so on for three more minutes.

Wick was Wickersham Evers, Bradley's younger brother. Wick was an end on the Penn State football team. Wickersham Evers, the famous End.

Late that night as I lay in bed on my curlers, inviting sleep to come and stay with me, the shreds of misgiving which had flown away earlier when I was talking to Daddy, came rushing back to me like a hundred squealing bats: I was, after all, only a dumb blonde and this so-called honor, this Athena business, only confirmed it. I was doomed to a life of passive decoration.

Both Mummy and Daddy showed up the next day. And Danny. And Wickersham. And so did reporters, smirking, and so did two photographers who greeted each other like brothers and sat down on the grass and played gin rummy all day until the presentation

when they took several shots of me and Dr. Jocelyn and Irmgard Bleet (the previous Athena). The caption below the picture in next day's Boston *Globe* read "Dead-pan Beauty Robed as Red Ridge Blooms." The dead-pan bit was perfectly predictable, knowing me.

The bats had escaped again as Der Tag began and I felt much better about being Athena. I started acting as soon as I got up; at breakfast all conversation was speculation as to WHO IT WAS!

Mary Mistenburgh followed me back to my room after the meal.

"You're it, no?" she said, smiling.

"Damned if I'm not," I said.

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer girl." And Mary actually kissed my cheek.

Then she said, "Bradley coming up?"

"No, he's got finals this week. I'm terribly disappointed."

"That so?"

I could have hit her. She had a way of being horribly obnoxious.

Actually, only Mary guessed. Mary and the Committee and my mother and father and the semi-senile President of the College, Dr. Carl Jocelyn, knew. And me. I knew. I carried my secret around like a child inside me, and I could feel it growing all day. I couldn't eat. We were all standing around on The Green in front of a table piled high with our bacchanalian feast: egg salad, American cheese, and ham salad sandwiches on cotton bread, individual blocks of vanilla ice cream, each with a red raspberry-flavored R embedded in it, and grape juice. I couldn't bring myself to look at it. Mummy didn't help my nervousness at all; she kept asking me all kinds of stupid questions like:

"Which teacher is that, the one in that frumpy pink dress and those terrible shoes?" She stared at what she didn't quite dare call a "creature."

"That's Miss Fiori, she teaches Spanish," I said. "She publishes poetry all the time, I mean she translates Spanish poetry into

English and then it gets published in littleay that it was some-
married to a hero of the Spanish Civil War any in Italy and yet
it and that's why she looks so sad and doesn't bbe Panathenaic
she dresses or anything. If you must know, Miss Fiacred and at
the faculty member most admired by the student body. is Antoi-
like to be introduced to her?" what I

"No, thank you, dear, I was just wondering who she was. that
aren't you eating?" Good old Mother, always concerned about an
appetite.

"I guess I'm just not very hungry. Butterflies." I wanted her
sympathy because I was really starting to get awfully nervous.

"Nonsense," she declared, "what's there to be frightened of? You
don't have to make a speech, do you?"

"Thank God, no," I said, "but I'm scared anyway—anybody
would be. So please don't mind if I don't eat anything; I'm not
going to waste away."

Daddy finally came to my defense. "Nicky doesn't have to eat if
she doesn't feel like it, May," he said to my mother. "I can't blame
her. I'd be nervous too, sugar," he said to me. "Now, why don't
we take a little walk, you and I, and you show me the sights." Daddy
had already seen the sights, the year before, but he was
trying to loosen me up and I was grateful.

Dr. Carl Jocelyn was another matter entirely. All day, extra-
curricular trees planted in September were bearing their fruit on
schedule: we watched a recital by the modern dance club, sam-
pled some Greek food cooked by Home Science majors (everyone
got one half of a stuffed grape leaf), listened to a recital of two
hundred lines of Ovid (by a girl from Athens), looked at a water
ballet, and cheered a relay race run by Phys. Ed. majors. Dr.
Jocelyn was present at all of it, sitting in splendor, rather like a
Roman Emperor at the gladiatorial games (Greek and Roman
cultures ran into each other like wet water colors), pompously
receiving a bow from the participants before each event.

Dr. Jocelyn was around sixty-five, I think, not old at all; he
just *acted* addled. The year before, he had married the Hygiene

teacher, a woman about thirty years younger than he. She always looked worn out while he bloomed, pink-cheeked, high chested, and clear-eyed. On this particular day Dr. Jocelyn was wearing a blue linen suit with white buttons and, of all inappropriate things, a yachting cap. He wouldn't have looked any sillier if he had appeared in a toga.

This man, whom everyone mocked behind his back and who liked to be called Commodore (to his credit he *was* considered the authority on the history of American yachting), insisted on taking part every year in the presentation of the peplos to Athena (also known as the Virgin Goddess). And so shortly before the procession began and right after the announcement that Antoinette Hapgood would be Athena and not a goat, Joannie Billings and I went to the President's office for a rehearsal—not that there was much to rehearse. I mean Dr. Jocelyn had done the same thing so many times he must have been as familiar with the ceremony as with the contours of the female body (I forgot to mention that he was a notorious fanny fonder). And I had really nothing to do—just sit still, as I've said—but the Committee felt I ought to go through it once, so I would know what to expect and get the timing right.

Joannie and I arrived before Dr. Jocelyn, and I was just beginning to relax and snoop around a little, inspecting his sailing prints and hoping to discover something fascinating or grotesque to tell Mary about, when in blew Dr. J., so enthusiastic you would have thought he was Orson Welles about to play Macbeth.

"Well girls, so we're here, at the big moment again. I must say, every time I portray the priest I cannot help feeling a sense of what the real thing must have been like, the magnificent display and high purpose. It must have been quite a show. Quite a show. There she sat, this beautiful marble woman"—he looked sideways at me, sizing up my complexion—"the Virgin Goddess of the great city of Athens while the entire population—that is to say not, of course, the slaves but all the citizens—came to her with sacrificial animals, with olive branches, with magnificent vases and

what have you. A stone statue! You might say that it was somewhat like these Saints' festivals that go on today in Italy and yet I don't believe it blasphemous to venture that the Panathenaic Festival of ancient Greece was more majestic and sacred and at the same time more completely charming. Your name is Antoinette? Antoinette, my dear, I hope you feel something of what I am trying to convey. If you do, it will make this ceremony—that we are re-creating so poorly—meaningful to every single person watching it. It must be very solemn and very beautiful."

When this unexpected eulogy was over, the businesslike Joannie Billings said, "Now, Dr. Jocelyn makes his speech of welcome to parents and friends and then he comes up to you, Nicky, and places the peplos around your shoulders and steps back. Nicky, it wouldn't hurt if you cried a little, but big tears, please, so they can be seen in the last row. Do you think you can do that?"

"I hope so," I said, surprised.

"Now let's go over the robing. Nicky, you sit there." (She pointed to an upholstered bench near the fireplace.) "And, Dr. Jocelyn, you place the robe across Nicky's shoulders. Do you have it?"

"Yes, indeed." Dr. Jocelyn picked up his phone and asked someone named Sally to "bring in the peplos, if you please." While we waited for Sally, Dr. Jocelyn kept smiling at me in this familiar way. It made me very uncomfortable.

"Now!" Joannie said.

Dr. Jocelyn unfolded the yellow cape, came around in back of me, and slowly settled it across my shoulders. I could feel his legs against me and smell some kind of sweetish perfume clinging to his pants, along with tobacco smoke. The robe weighed a ton and I began to feel just plain stupid. It wasn't at all like playing a role in a play; this was neither here nor there. I was someone else but I was still me. I couldn't get with it; it all seemed so incredibly foolish and at the same time I was really trembling from stage fright (not an unfamiliar sensation: I *always* get stage fright).

From above, Dr. Jocelyn said, "Why Antoinette, child, you're shivering."

I nodded, dumbly.

And then he did the most astonishing thing. He reached around and felt my breasts. I mean he was like a two-handed snake and I could not move and I felt my face going hot and red with horror and embarrassment. Then he brought his head down, quickly, like a sparrow after a crumb, and kissed my cheek, wetly, so that he left a tiny spot of his spit on my skin. My stomach turned over and still I did not move.

And that hypocrite, Joannie Billings, buried her head in her notebook, pretending not to see, having expected something like this all along. She should have warned me. I was as angry at her as I was at Dr. J. I thought, Oh, God, how am I going to get out of this and why does this always happen to me and I wish people would leave me alone and stop trying to smother me. The funny thing was I was feeling so many things at once. I wanted my cake (the peplos and what it symbolized) and I wanted to eat it too (make fun of it), which Daddy has always assured me is impossible. But what I want to know is why, if you have your cake, can't you eat a little bit of it? Can't you take a long while over it? I mean, why assume that everyone is an insensitive glutton?

Dr. Jocelyn continued to fondle me for what seemed like hours, though it couldn't have been more than a minute or so, and I was dying to jab him where it would really hurt but I just couldn't; I had to suffer it: it was the misery I was certain accompanied everything pleasant.

Finally our "rehearsal" was over and we all left Dr. J.'s office acting as if nothing in the world had happened, but I was terrified that I would have to submit to the satyr inside the college president again. I needn't have worried: the satyr bowed to the gentleman during the actual performance.

But my sense of doubleness, during the long hour of the procession, increased so drastically that I felt I was both Athena *and* Nicky Hapgood, sitting with her family, watching while the girls

of Red Ridge went through the absurd motions of being young boys, animals, and horseback riders on their way up a fake Acropolis with a yellow cape inside a rowboat on wheels.

From where I sat under a cardboard approximation of one of the porches of the Parthenon, I could see my parents and brother and Wickersham in the first row. I tried not to let on I was looking at them but I was curious about their reactions. Mother and Daddy were smiling, absorbed. Wickersham, horny Wickersham, was busy looking over the crop of girls and did not even attempt to hide his lack of interest in what was going on in front of him. Most boys I knew, that is, most boys brought up in a certain way at home and at the same schools as all their friends, acted fairly cool around girls they had not met. I mean, they rarely made an overt move toward a girl but waited out some implicit and defined warming-up period. Wick was different: when he saw a girl he liked he would introduce himself immediately (or maybe not even bother with that) and begin making the sort of childish remark that always made me, for one, blush. Like asking her if she liked games and, if she said yes, suggesting strip poker. *Some* girls actually went for Wick.

Anyway, there I was, with my bottom falling asleep, while my friends built a huge stack of ersatz olive branches at my feet and encircled me with a ring of papier-mâché vases, watching Wickersham Evers cleaning his nails surreptitiously and leering around him like a lion whom some immoral but sympathetic genie has shoved into a cage of succulent young foxes. But this didn't surprise me; what I found astonishing was Danny.

Danny looked as if he had never seen me before.

And thus *he* was strange to me; it worked both ways. He was apparently so impressed that my being his sister was quite irrelevant. I was Athena, not Antoinette. Three girls in back of me were hitting drums in a slow, almost funereal cadence intended to keep the procession at an even pace (which it did). But somehow, after the first half hour, the beat began to say things to me. *I am safe, I am safe. Then Who am I? Who am I? Then What's*

the use? What's the use? I just couldn't bear to see Danny staring at me that way. It threw me into a terrible confusion, and I began to shiver, as I had in Dr. Jocelyn's office. And when Dr. Jocelyn, proud as a farmer with a prize squash, placed the yellow robe on me and everyone in the audience breathed a sigh of manufactured pleasure, I was practically numb from my own turmoil. That's why the picture in the papers showed me neither smiling nor, as Joannie would have preferred, teary. All my emotional energy was being used to hold myself together.

When it was all over, and the horses and goats had turned back into the ordinary white mice of Red Ridge, jabbering and looking for food, I discovered that I was dizzy and perspiring and, finding myself alone for a moment, I managed to escape down to the pond where for five minutes I watched the water rippling calmly and the tiny stalks of green slime bending back and forth under the water. I looked at the sky and it was still blue, the soil under my Capezio slippers still had pebbles embedded in it, the breeze was still capable of drying the back of my neck. It was mysterious but reassuring somehow, and I felt at last that I could safely go back.

Danny had been searching for me; he met me along the path to the pond and said "Hi, Nicky, I was looking all over for you. Gee, you were just great."

I smiled wanly and raised my brows. "I was? What did I do?"

"Well," he said, not having analyzed his judgment, "you looked just like a goddess."

"But goddesses aren't real. And I was supposed to be a statue. Remember?"

"What difference does that make? But let's not go into the fine points now. Let's change the subject. Like, for instance, how about that Wickersham Evers? What a cocksman!"

"What's a cocksman?"

"A guy who gets slapped a lot," Danny said. "Also laid a lot. Doesn't much take after his brother Bradley, does he?"

"Not a bit," I said. "Promise you won't tell anyone, but I think Wickersham's just awful. The end."

"Give that girl ten snickers. Listen, Nicky, if you're really interested in Bradley Evers I suggest you separate Wick from Mr. and Mrs. Hapgood tout de suite. Mom's about to have a shit fit, I think she minds his public nail-cleaning more than his sex fiend qualities. Which reminds me, how's your sexy boy friend?"

"Bradley's fine. He's taking his finals today."

"Good boy. Anything new on that front?"

"No, nothing new. He sends you, by the way, his best. Although I can't imagine why."

"His best what?" Danny said. "I wasn't sure he had any."

"Danny, for heaven's sake, lay off," I said trying a smile on him. "I'm beat. I can't take that kind of joking now."

"Okay, I guess you *do* deserve a break. Only . . . Nicky?"

"What, Danny?"

"Nothing, I guess." It was the only time I ever saw Danny holding back something he really wanted to say. Whatever it was, he was so worried about me—specifically about me and Bradley (and involved too, in spite of himself)—that he did not know how to talk about it.

As Athena I was certainly the winner. I felt like a cross between Miss America and the Faery Queen. It was as unreal as an adventure you make up in your mind. Since I was the winner in a contest of beauty I owned the power inherent in beauty. What happens to you *is*, after all, important. The Festival *did* alter my lump of clay, did help shape what I have become, and my feelings about being Athena *did* have something to do with what happened later, my panic and disaster.

I would be delighted to place the blame for most of my misfortunes on the shoulders of my unfortunate mother, my poor mother who finds that life is a trick. (Daddy will recover from what happened because he loves me so much, but Mother never will because she thinks I don't love her.) But I can't do it because although she may be partly responsible for my blue eyes and my

pretty-pretty face, it was not she who gave me this noxious idea that I can never be wholly *anything* or *anybody*, that I am going too many different ways, that I have never once been completely committed to anything; and that I can do no wrong.

XI

NATURALLY, everything after the Festival was a letdown. Even my graduation, because I was simply one in one hundred and fifty. I was graduated with honors but honors at Red Ridge are not the same things as honors at Radcliffe, and I felt no more excited about them than about the tassel on my mortarboard. Mother and Daddy, though, treated me as if I'd won the Nobel Prize for scholarship (if they had one) and after the ceremony Mummy pulled me into her arms and hugged me and for an instant caressed my cheek with hers. She left tears on my face and I, astonished, thought, my God, she's moved, she minds this, she's happy, which I must confess was quite a revelation and made me want to avoid her eyes but her delight dissolved quickly, like snow falling into water and by evening she was all hard purpose again.

"Nicky," she said, turning her head around so I could see her profile from the back seat of the car, "your father and I would like to give a party for you at the club." Her voice didn't sound very much like a party.

"Yes, princess," Daddy said, "our only daughter is now a college graduate and ready for the world and we would like to celebrate the event."

"Daddy, I'd rather not," I said, timid. Then I warmed up a

little. "Besides, I came out already." I guess I've forgotten to mention that I'd gone to a couple of those assembly things the year before and my picture had been in the local paper and I'd thus been designated a "debutante."

"Nicky," Mother said, disapproving.

"Rather not?" Daddy said. "Why not?"

"Because I haven't *done* anything," I said. "I haven't even got a B.A."

"Done anything like what?" Mother went on relentlessly.

"Oh Mom," Danny interrupted, "leave the poor kid alone."

"Don't interrupt, young man." Daddy cut him off.

"I was just . . ."

"I said be quiet," Daddy told him. I couldn't imagine why my being against this party was generating so much heat. I wanted, God help me, to be back at school and not trapped like this.

Then I said it: "I want to take an acting class. I want to act."

Mother and Daddy treated this announcement as if I'd just told them I was planning to live in the Soviet Union. However, they insisted on continuing this dreadful discussion in the car; they couldn't even wait until we'd got home and unpacked. Danny started sulking (for my sake) and I began to vilify myself, silently, for my disastrous timing: I should have waited a little while before I broached the acting business. And yet I could not understand why they reacted so violently. After all, this was not the nineteenth century and I was not a fallen woman.

By the time we reached home Mother was hard-mouthed and vengeful, Daddy was bewildered and intransigent, Danny was ready to leave home, and I was a resentful wreck. A home-coming about as attractive as the smell of my own knee.

For the first time in my life, I was aware of my parents' attempt to railroad me and I was still nowhere near strong enough to resist. I was the Little Red Caboose and my parents were the entire Twentieth Century Limited.

So the summer following my graduation from Red Ridge (after the party at the club), Danny and I spent swimming and sailing

and playing tennis and beach-picnicking on Nantucket. Daddy flew up Fridays and back Mondays. Mother stayed with us and got a superior tan on the beach and had a perfectly marvelous time at the Yacht Club playing cards and going to cocktail parties and riding in the club launch during the races. It was the kind of ideally athletic, clean, and graceful summer that I imagine you look back on when you're old and bent with age and responsibilities and say to yourself about: "Ah, my carefree youth, the days of sun and pleasure, how I wish I could relive them!" I was miserable.

For I was deprived of the two things I most wanted: Bradley and the Theater. I must confess that I was allowed to work in a tiny summer theater (I guess Mummy and Daddy figured it was just harmless vacation fun and therefore permissible) sweeping under rickety seats, selling tickets, and, if the director, Beau Oltarsh, was feeling especially magnanimous and un-hung-over, walking on with a tray of ersatz cocktails. I honestly would not have minded, because I know apprentices are exploited—but the Beach Plum Theater was so miserable. Pretentious, really. I mean they were terribly ambitious and instead of doing *Our Town* or *The Man Who Came to Dinner*—which they might have brought off—they tried things like *Antigone* and *The Cocktail Party* and flopped all over the place. It was not good enough for me; I'm not even sure it was better than nothing.

As for Bradley: whatever differences there were between us, whatever I should have been learning about him and he about me was veiled by the miles that separated us. Bradley remained the mysterious unknown lover for whom I pined. How could I grow tired of someone I knew mainly as a signature on the bottom of a sheet of onionskin stationery?

And so I had a "good time." I find it disagreeable to have to think back over this particular part of that particular summer because it is so obvious to me that I acted quite blindly and stupidly. It seemed to me then that I had given my heart totally to Bradley Evers, I had given *me* to him, so that whatever I did was of no

consequence to anybody—especially to me. Now, of course, I can see that I had not really given *anything* to Bradley.

What I mean by a good time was simply flirtation carried to extremes. I was convinced that what I was doing had no connection with my future or my true loyalties. It still surprises me how foolish I was. These flirtations were with two men, one a bus boy at the Blue Whale Inn, the other the director I mentioned. Every time I have to think of Beau Oltarsh, I squirm. And the same with Jimmy Paltz, but for another reason.

Mummy took Danny and me to the Blue Whale for dinner our first Thursday (otherwise known as maid's-night-out) on Nantucket. Danny was in great shape, having beaten the tennis pro at the Beach Club, and, cashing in on that, snared a date with the most popular girl around, a little snit from St. Louis named Charlianne something. I had just received a long, sentimental letter from Bradley that morning and was feeling appropriately widowish, like Scarlett O'Hara in mourning for her first husband (whom she barely knew and cared for even less). The dining room was low-ceilinged with tables set up irregularly, like polka dots on a dress, and windows on three sides so you could watch the gulls eating what you left on your plate. I was wearing an old, faded cotton dress with a hole under the left arm (which Mummy hadn't noticed) and a defiant "don't bother looking at me" quality about it, for I was positive I couldn't have a good time no matter where I was or what I did.

We ordered clams and lobsters and then this cute boy started pouring water from a large blue pitcher into my blue tumbler and I felt myself trying not to look at him. Danny, naturally, began talking to him. He found out his name was Jimmy Paltz and that he was a junior at Dartmouth. He found out his working hours, his taste in music, and what he thought about the President. Everything but his blood type. If Mummy was annoyed at Danny's talking to "the Help," as she would have put it, she consoled herself with the thought that the help was actually a college

boy. She buttered her roll and looked on went on jabbering.

For some reason I was embarrassed. I had this boy, Jimmy, might think that Danny *my* sake. You know: my big sister needs a half bad if you blur your eyes a little when you even sort of pretty. Jimmy Paltz did not *seem* to way but I couldn't be absolutely sure. And after he left I saw him look at me, once or twice, from across the room.

Things always had a way of getting set in motion with no assistance from me. And the only power I seemed to have—a power over Bradley—I didn't want.

Well, Danny and Jimmy became friends immediately. They played tennis at the public courts during Jimmy's off-duty hours in the afternoon and I was "persuaded" by Danny to watch and pretty soon we all went swimming together and then, one night about two weeks after that first dinner, Jimmy picked me up at the theater after the performance and walked me down to the beach and we got into the hottest petting session I'd ever been in. I'm against petting because it's so frustrating, but with Jimmy (as with Farley) I couldn't say no. Jimmy was absolutely one of the sexiest boys who ever wanted to kiss me. He had his own ways of making me feel wonderful. I mean he was both persuasive and sweet. Nor did he make me feel the least bit cheap—which was quite an accomplishment, under the circumstances.

As we walked back along the road that led toward people and houses, under a sky so filled with bright stars I was sure I could, if I kept track properly, count them, with the road slicing the moorlike grass of the island, studded with thistles and cranberry bushes, and the smell of the sea assailing us like a watery warning, Jimmy talked to me.

I discovered that this boy, to whom I felt, at that moment, miraculously close—as if we had grown up together and were almost one—was actually very simple. He had set goals for himself and was bound, sooner or later, to meet them. His tastes were unspec-

consequence to predictable, but he had something Bradley did not see that I had of precise honesty—about himself, about what he

What have to do—that was instantly appealing.

Jimmy said, "Your brother says you're almost engaged. How come you came down to the beach with me?"

I was startled by his directness. "Well," I said, "I guess I am sort of going with someone. He's in Georgia." And then I lied to him because I did not know how to explain myself by the truth. "I'm not engaged, though. Bradley—that's this boy's name—wants me to go out with other people." (And here was the lie.) "He does. I guess you might say we're sort of trying each other out. It may not come to anything at all. What else did Danny say?"

"Not much. But he didn't need to tell me he doesn't think too much of this Bradley. What's the matter with him? Two heads?"

I laughed. "Oh, no, Danny just thinks I'm too young to be engaged or anything."

"Nicky, look, you're a pretty terrific girl. But frankly I don't want to be on anyone's second-string team. Just the idea makes me sore. So you'd better tell me right now what the score is with you and this guy Bradley."

While he talked he tossed pebbles he'd scooped up from the side of the road, tossed them one by one so that they landed with a tiny ping and a bounce.

"I just told you," I said, "Bradley and I have been going together. But I'm *not* engaged. Ask Danny, he'll tell you." I began to believe myself. After all, I *wasn't* engaged, technically. I had no ring, no announcement had been made. I grabbed Jimmy's hand, the one with the pebbles in it, and I shook it so that the little stones spilled all over the road and our feet. They felt like cool drops of water. Jimmy took my hair in his hand and gently tugged my head back and kissed me deep in my mouth. It was a kiss that said please and thank you and asked me unanswerable questions.

I said, when we had finished the kiss, "Jimmy, I wish . . ."

"You wish what, my sweet Nicky? Say, and I'll do whatever you want."

"Oh, I don't know, Jimmy. Let's just not have to talk about me."

I think Jimmy understood that Bradley meant more to me than I admitted and that, at the same time, I liked him, Jimmy, enough to consider changing my allegiance. And he was willing to take the chance.

At any rate, I began seeing Jimmy often, after the theater let out and in the couple of afternoon hours which the hotel gave him (Jimmy said the only reason the underpaid and overworked college kids got any daylight time off was that the hotel management realized it was bad public relations to let them exhibit a prison pallor in the dining room). We really had fun together. We liked each other and, in many ways, we complemented one another's natures. And, to be honest, we were always going off to get rid of what seemed to be a growing sexual energy. And so we did end up going the whole way, only once or twice, we couldn't help ourselves and it was lovely. It was like being on an island surrounded by perfumed vegetation with an entire technicolor orchestra playing Berlioz just for us.

Jimmy Paltz was going to be a lawyer and run for office and probably make it. He had an open, straightforward expression, a frequent smile, a tough handshake, and a personal manner that made even the nastiest old ladies at the Blue Whale call him dear and insist that he alone pour their water and clear away their dirty dishes.

You may be thinking that Jimmy sounds a lot like Bradley. As a matter of fact, in many ways they *were* similar but there was one big difference: there was a psychic pliability in Bradley (a quality that Danny would call ball-lessness) while Jimmy Paltz had a core of toughness that was not only hard to resist but extremely rare. He was tough on others and tough with himself. He had the makings of a real man. It was a difference I only sensed, then. Now, I can put my finger on it, feel it, and have it touch me back—it is

that substantial. Danny had recognized the difference immediately; I think he would have been pleased if I had gotten myself pregnant and *had* to marry Jimmy. Mother, incidentally, saw Jimmy only as a boy who had to work his way through college and therefore quite out of the question.

Jimmy was a lovely lapse, a kind of sliding backwards for me, and I slid willingly enough without, typically, thinking of the consequences.

Then there was Beau Oltarsh, quite another cup of tea. All the old chestnuts about casting couches, etc., may be exaggerations but, my God, why do people in The Theater always want to exhibit themselves, gossip, or screw? Beau, the Director of the Beach Plum Theater (the rumor was his name was really Marvin), was one of the more unsavory characters I've known. I think if Mummy had taken the trouble to investigate the Beach Plum she would have had a fit. But since the theater was considered "acceptable" by the fancy summer community—God knows why—it was "acceptable" to her. I got involved with Beau partly because I was too naïve to see what was playing simultaneously with the current attraction, and partly because Beau flattered me.

Beau was so theatrical he sounded like a parody. I mean he really *did* call everybody darling the moment he laid eyes on him. He really *did* wear an ascot in an open oxford shirt and a black blazer with two vents and brass buttons. He really *did* talk about "Gadge" and "the Studio" and "Marilyn's Analyst"—until they were coming out of your ears. And he really *did* try to lay everybody, with gorgeous indiscrimination: anything alive and on two legs. I could never understand at the time why I was so relieved to walk out through the stage door each night. I mean, there I was, my nose literally rubbed in the very things that could mean as much to me as love: the plays, the smell, the actors, the crummy stage furniture, the lights, the paint, the works, and yet, though I couldn't help being sickishly excited each time the curtain split down the middle and cracked apart, there was something un-

speaking about the Beach Plum that made me simply want to escape every night.

Now, of course, I understand, now the unspeakable has found its voice. It says: "Second-Rate." Since then I've seen it operate so many times that I can take it for granted, but then it was utterly hidden from me: second-rate people are generally mean, professionally. They seem to get a peculiar satisfaction from hurting other people's feelings, and from making them feel stupid and inadequate. It's as if they were trying to make up for second-rate talent by acting like first-rate rats. Beau Oltarsh was like that. He had refined an insinuating manner that drew you on by flattery and, when you were hooked, tried to make you miserable.

My first day at work, the day after he hired me, Beau was perfectly charming. I mean he showed me over the premises—they were an abandoned garage and woodshed (the box office) and he introduced me to the staff and the actors. "Our little apprentice" was how Beau identified me, "come to share the glamor and mystery of our poor stage."

"Follow me, Miss Hapgood, into my inner sanctum, and we'll discuss your duties." He'd already discussed my duties, of course. What he meant was "examine your possibilities" or, to put it crudely, "see if you're willing." Beau wasn't bad looking—if you like a man with a lot of hair, a sneer for a smile, and a nose like Zachary Scott's, that twitched when he spoke. I figured him for about forty-one or -two trying for thirty. No paunch or fat visible but ineradicable lines of age across his forehead and hands that trembled slightly (due, I found later, to too much booze). Beau wasn't bad looking and I was so absorbed with plans for a glamorous professional debut that I failed to realize that Beau was neither a gentleman nor, for that matter, any other kind of man. I was simply eating up the attention this Big Director was paying me.

But in an ironic way my innocence paid off, for once the door of the office was shut I was so "eager," you know, jabbering about what plays we were going to do and what I was going to do in them, about the deplorable state of the American theater and all

the hard work I was willing to do that Beau just gave up (for the moment) and, instead of screwing me, he set me to patching a costume. Incidentally, he had an antique oval shaving mirror on his desk and a full-length mirror on what I thought was a closet (and later was revealed as a bar). And while I talked he poked his nose at himself and studied the pores, sighing.

Beau's misfortune was not that he was a rotten director (actually, he had good dramatic instincts and he knew how to flatter an actor into doing his best) but that he refused to do the easy things first and work up to the difficult. He wanted to make it right away.

The actors at the Beach Plum, though perfectly friendly to me, never allowed me to feel I was one of them. I think they resented the fact that I was willing to work for nothing (though they were making hardly more than I was); they thought it unfair to the profession (as it is). Also, they were not especially delighted by the attention Beau paid me. Several, in fact, were plainly jealous of me. The actors lived together in a sort of dormitory behind the theater (garage) where they slept all day and held wild parties almost every night. The parties were famous and exclusive and I still don't know why my mother never mentioned them to me—Danny certainly had heard about them. And then, one Friday when Jimmy was obliged to go out with his parents who were visiting him for the week end, Beau took me to one. It wasn't the talk that surprised me (the same old thing: gossip, back-rubbing, human vivisection) it was the combinations and permutations that developed.

I left Mummy and Daddy at the Club, calmly playing bridge with the Franklins of Bronxville, New York, and stepped into another world, with Beau Oltarsh as my Virgil. Beau started drinking this awful whisky that burned not only your stomach but also your tongue and probably took the enamel off your teeth as well; and partly in self-defense and partly because I did not know how to refuse, I started drinking it too. And slowly the mood of all the others invaded me and I almost crossed over the line from spectator to participant.

Beau said "Look." In one corner of the room two boys squatted together, tweaking each other all over and giggling like four-year-olds. On the other side of the room the female character actress, a woman in her late fifties with a red wig and a Russian accent, sat on a couch, stroking the cheek of a young man next to her with his hands locked across the top of his head crooning "more" over and over again. Beau said, "You see what I mean, these children are true artists, darling; only artists know how to relax *their inhibitions*. Wonderful." He swallowed more whisky and smiled at me.

"I see what you mean," I said.

"Now, you, Nicky, why don't you try relaxing? You are too stiff, you do not let yourself go, you are holding your desires too much in check. Come, let me show you."

Beau's four hands drew me into a sort of dark coat-room place and began to investigate my clothes. Bradley was nowhere about. Bradley might have been on the moon. And yet, like the moonlight that poured in through my bedroom window onto my bed at home, Bradley sought me. I thought, Bradley, if you were here I wouldn't be doing this. You should be with me; you see where I'm going because you're not? By and by I convinced myself that this was entirely Bradley's fault.

"I'm going to show you how to relax, darling," Beau said, as if he were demonstrating Zen or Yoga, "and the first principle of relaxation, the secret, is that there must be nothing constricting your lungs and chest." I had on a skirt and silk overblouse without buttons and before I knew what was happening I felt my blouse being slid up and my brassière adroitly unhooked and my defenseless young body being pulled downward. In a second I was sitting on this sofa that scratched my legs like hay and smelled like the smoking car on the New Haven. It was dark enough but I could see Beau's eyes flashing with lust. Then Beau, having carelessly left his glass on the floor, kicked over his drink; whisky, ice, and surprise hit my feet. I squealed.

"Hush, darling," Beau said, misunderstanding, "I won't hurt you. Now take seven deep breaths, close your eyes, and think of

love. Relax, relax." And he began running his skinny fingers over my back (rather deliciously) and murmuring "relax," drawing out the last syllable, groaning on it. Then, just as I was about to concede: silence. Beau had fallen asleep. Or passed out. Whichever it was, he was out cold and snoring now, in great phlegmy gasps. Gratefully, I disentangled myself and escaped through a side door.

Then I went back to the Club and watched Mummy and Daddy beat the pants off the Franklins at the bridge table. It was a boring way to end the evening—but a safe one.

The next day Beau was as frosty as a morning in February; the frost even outdid the hang-over, which was a lulu. And even though he had no case against me—it was *he* who had fallen asleep, after all—he took me out of a small part he had promised me the day before. I felt ghastly, it was unfair, and crime (or sin) must, after all, pay. And yet, I could not see Beau as he was and for the remainder of the summer I tried to make him like me in every way I could. I could never bear the thought that someone did not think I was It.

By now, you must have some idea of what kind of "good time" I had that summer. In a way I was unconsciously limbering up for the final exhibition of self-betrayal. For it's not so easy; not everybody can betray themselves right off the bat. It takes practice. Small betrayals first, then larger. By the time I ran out on Bradley I was quite accomplished.

Danny bothered me that summer. Always before (and since), we've been allies. At first against our parents and later, the world. But during this difficult period he needled me, he gave me a particularly hard time, he confused me and left me in confusion. I felt alone, deserted by my brother, left by my lover. Danny teased me about Bradley's letters. He called them "one-a-day brand" sex stimulants; he deliberately talked about me and Bradley in front of Mummy, making fun of us in such a subtle way that only I would understand. He got a rise out of me so often that Mummy told me I was ill-tempered and spoiled. I knew she was just dying

for me to say something definite about me and Bradley, and then one night after dinner she said her piece about me and Jimmy Paltz.

"Nicky dear, don't you think it looks somewhat irregular for you to be seeing so much of young Jimmy from the hotel when Bradley will be here in a few weeks?"

"Irregular, Mother? No, I don't. Jimmy and I are just having fun together, like kids. Everybody knows that."

"That is exactly what I'm driving at. Everybody knows. Does Bradley know?"

"I've told Bradley I'm having dates. He knows."

"Well, that's really beside the point," Mummy said, starting on a new tack. "It seems to me you should be thinking a little more about your reputation and a little less about your momentary pleasures. After all, you're not a child any longer, you're a young woman of a certain class (she actually used those words) and a girl who's about to become engaged—now don't interrupt me. Your standards of behavior could be a good deal higher. Running around with all sorts of men is hardly what Daddy and I consider acceptable conduct."

For a moment I was sure she knew about Beau. Then I convinced myself she didn't. "Mother," I said, "I am *not* running around with all sorts of men, as you put it. And as for that 'certain class' jazz I refuse to believe I should behave any differently from any other girl—what a nauseating idea. And as for your insinuations that I'm playing around behind Bradley's back, it's simply not true." I lowered my voice. "Mother, lay off me, for heaven's sake or I just may start doing what you're so afraid of."

My mother was as stunned as she had been long ago when I had screamed at her for locking up my dog, Henrietta. I so rarely found the nerve to say what I really felt, to express my fury, that when I *could* get sufficiently aroused, I must say, the effect was gratifying. But it was hard on us both.

And then the week of Bradley's visit finally arrived. He had already started working in his father's construction business—in

the field, literally getting to know the work from the ground up—and his father had given him a week off to come and see me. It was all we had together in over three months. It was not enough.

By this time even Daddy was aware that I was serious about what he called "that tall drink of water from Dixie." It seemed to me that there were enough reasons Daddy might have suspected Bradley of all sorts of evil. Here are a few that occurred to me at the time. (1) Bradley was a Democrat (though if Daddy had bothered to really listen to Bradley he would have discovered in him a gaggle of boringly similar ideas); (2) Bradley hadn't gone to Yale; and (3) he quite obviously meant to carry off Daddy's daughter. I guess 3 is the most important. But for some reason that baffled me at the time, Daddy was wild about having the two lovebirds cooing under his roof.

Mother said certainly I could have the car to meet Bradley's plane. I hate flying. I hate planes. I never believe they can actually leave the ground. I mean I can be watching a plane take off and at the same time be absolutely convinced that it will not fly. So anything to do with planes or flying always makes me terribly nervous but also excited. If I happen to be caught inside a plane I feel I have to hold my breath until we've landed. Driving out to meet Bradley at the Nantucket airport I was so excited by everything that my leg trembled over the gas pedal.

Naturally I got there early and naturally the plane was late so I waited, impatient, while life on the ground continued with what seemed like a cushioned normalcy, as if I had cotton wadding in my ears or we were all inside a cardboard box. I was feeling so many different ways at once that it doesn't surprise me a bit now that everything seemed muffled, but then I kept swallowing and shaking my head to get rid of this disagreeable sensation, and not being able to.

I sat down on a chair with a plastic seat and chrome arms and tried to talk myself into being calm. No, Bradley's plane is *not* on fire and screaming down the sky, no, they are *not* having trouble with the landing gear, no, there is *no* maniac on board, shooting

up the pilot and all the passengers. These fantasies became so real that I was suddenly filled with an intense longing, like heat rising in me, and I nearly wept from wanting to see Bradley, to have him safe, to touch him. And then another misery took over and the knowledge that I'd misbehaved—with Jimmy, with Beau—convinced me that Bradley ought not to forgive me. Then the phone rang on the ticket counter, the noise going through me like a shot. I must have jumped out of my chair. And as it continued to ring, unanswered, the sound reverberating off the walls, echoing and bouncing around the tiny, stuffy room, the blood rose to my face and my stomach sickened. I wanted to shout "Answer it! Answer it!" For I was certain it was someone calling with the terrible news of Bradley's plane's crash.

Finally a man went over and said "Yup," into the receiver. And it was nothing, it was nothing at all to do with me or Bradley or any plane crash, it was just a routine telephone call.

After this unnerving little episode, I felt definitely claustrophobic and went outside to wait and compose myself.

The field was beautiful, surrounded by nothing but soft clouds and an insinuating trace of sea-smell. The sky was as high up as I've ever remembered it; high, blue, and endless and the wind was as soft as a blade of tall grass brushing your leg.

Bradley Evers was the first down the aluminum steps. He appeared with his face up but immediately lowered it: the sun must have hit him like a sharp slap. I had not expected to see him so red. His neck and face and hands were crimson and hard-looking. Later, when he got into his bathing suit I realized that this blush stopped abruptly at the base of his neck. Of course, he had worked in the open in a T-shirt. His burn, unlike mine or my mother's, was acquired honestly, though unconsciously, and I liked it more for this reason, but Bradley was embarrassed by it and called himself a "lousy red-neck."

I would rather be a red-neck than what I was that summer. And I still don't know where my Calvinistic obsession came from, that it is better to work—anywhere, even in a sewer—than to lie

on a beach waiting for your skin pigment to change. Certainly not from my dear Ma-ma.

Anyway, at the airport we hugged and kissed and he said all kinds of words to me, pouring them from his mouth like jewels from a little pouch. He was handsome and smiling and, I thought, very sweet. People noticed us, what an attractive pair, how sweet is young love, they're so happy.

"Wait a minute, Bunny," I said, "here are the keys to the car. It's the black Buick. I'll check on your bags."

"Okay honey, I'll bring it around, I won't be long. God, it's great, it's more than great to see you, Nicky. I think I'll stay all summer."

"I know, Bunny." It was all I could think of to say.

It appears that every conversation I'm re-creating is fatuous. To be fair to us, though, our trouble was that we spent so little actual time together we never had a chance to explore *anything* but our relationship and, since our relationship never advanced beyond the very first stage, our talk was empty and repetitious. I mean how many ways can you say I like your hair or how much time do we have left?

As we were driving back to our cottage from the airport, Bradley began to lose his smile. I asked him if anything was wrong.

"Oh nothing, honey, it's just that I'm naturally a little apprehensive about seeing your family again. I mean living with them."

"Oh silly," I said, "it's just Danny and Mummy. If you tell Danny a new dirty story that'll take care of him, and Mother—well she's slightly stickier but I know she likes you. She's not so bad, really, and I'll tell you how to flatter her and you two will get along just fine."

"Flatter her?" Bradley sounded as if I'd just proposed doping her. Actually, scheming like that was second nature to me. "Flatter her how?" Bradley asked blankly.

"Well, for instance, tell her how tan she is, tell her the cottage looks beautiful and her flower bed is dreamy and you especially

like your room—she's been rearranging it for ages—tell her your family sends regards. That sort of thing. Is that so bad?"

"Mother *does* send regards," Bradley said.

"Sure," I said, "I don't mean you have to *lie* to her. Just make her feel appreciated."

"I see what you mean," Bradley said, brightening. "Compliment her."

"Exactly." I didn't feel like splitting hairs.

For her part Mother was astonishingly nice to Bradley. Danny was out sailing when we arrived and Mother had asked Anna, the cook, to make one of her great cheese soufflés and a tossed salad, with peaches and cherries and homemade chocolate cookies for dessert. Usually I made myself a peanut-butter or bologna sandwich for lunch. You can see that Mother was giving Bradley the treatment.

But the oddest part was that the more affection Mother lavished on Bradley and the more eagerly he responded, complimenting her and smiling at her all over the place, the farther I retreated from them all.

I had always thought—especially after seeing girls forced into foolish elopements or forcibly separated from their men by their parents—that it was a fine thing when your mother and father liked the boy you loved and vice versa. Yet here were Bradley and I, a living exhibit of an ideal situation—and I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear it and I couldn't understand it, either. Was I being smothered by the lavishness of my parents' approval or by my own doubts about Bradley? And yet, to be honest, I don't believe my feelings were so well defined as that. All I knew was that to see Bradley sitting at the table with us on Sunday morning, cutting through the crusty white of his fried egg with a precise wiggling of our silver fork and then sending a piece of toast cruising around the puddle of yolks and carrying on a rather manic conversation with Daddy about the best type of sailboat hull, all I knew was that my stomach turned around and said "no thank you."

Bradley seemed so settled. As if he were already the only, the beloved son-in-law. I think most other boys in a comparable situation would have felt slightly guilty, or, at least, awkward. I mean, consider *just* the sexual implications. And then the fact that a new generation is about to take over and push the elders off stage center. That kind of thing. But there was Bradley, happy as a clam, feeling not only accepted but welcomed. My sensation of being trapped started that week.

The entire week Bradley was there I devoted to efforts to getting us off by ourselves thinking I could escape that stifled feeling.

The only person not especially cordial to Bradley was Danny. I mean he wasn't out-and-out snotty or anything so crude as that, he just tried to make Bradley sore. He had to be fairly cagey, too, because he knew that if Bradley got mad enough I would get mad too. (Sometimes I think Danny ought to go into the Diplomatic Corps instead of journalism.) The whole thing was kind of pathetic because you could just see Bradley straining to be nice to Danny and trying at the same time to figure out what was going on.

One morning at breakfast, Bradley asked Danny if he would like to play tennis. Danny said, "Sure, how about 10:30? I'll meet you and Nicky at the Club. Three sets okay?"

I said, "Bradley, he's awfully good. He can beat the pro."

"Don't listen to her, Brad, she always exaggerates. I'm very uneven. As a matter of fact I feel off my game this week." Danny was lying through his teeth. Not only that, but he was probably going off to the courts before us so he could get all warmed up for the kill.

Bradley asked, "What's the routine? White shorts, shirt, socks? The usual?"

"Oh, I never bother about that crap."

"Danny," I broke in, "you do *too*. You *have* to."

"Okay," Danny said, "have it your own way."

But for some peculiar reason Bradley chose to believe Danny, not me, and he appeared at the club in madras shorts and a blue

polo shirt. Since he was a guest and not a member, nobody said anything about it to him but Bradley knew he'd been had. He was self-conscious and very mad; he was at a disadvantage before he'd served the first ball. And when my nasty little brother came out of the clubhouse all in white, as white as a novice, Bradley's face betrayed him. I saw a flicker of smile from Danny, then dead-pan.

"I thought you didn't go in for all that crap, Hapgood," Bradley said. "If you weren't Nicky's younger brother, I'd let you have it."

"Okay, Brad. Want to call off the game?" Danny stopped unscrewing his press and looked Bradley straight in the face, a challenge if I ever saw one. Bradley took it the way it was intended.

"Danny, I think you stink," I said.

"You mean, Nicky, it actually *matters* to you what color Bradley's shorts are? It's *important* to you?"

"Of course not, Danny," I said. "But apparently it matters to *you*. I don't see you in red, white, and blue."

"Just the opposite. I couldn't care less," Danny said. "It just so happens that these are my only clean shorts." Danny started opening his press again. Bradley looked as if he still couldn't decide about letting Danny have it.

"And shirt?" I asked.

"*And shirt.*"

"Danny, you are a liar. Come on, Bradley, let's leave this child and go swimming or something."

"No, Nicky. I think I want to play tennis with your brother. I think I'd be extremely sorry if I didn't." You see, Bradley was sure he was going to beat Danny. His pride was counting on it. And I was just as sure he was wrong—that if anything, he'd play a game worse than usual—and at that moment I wanted Danny to get clobbered. And you know the main reason I was against Danny? Because I felt his stratagem about the clothes was too petty; it wasn't worthy of him, it was neither subtle nor clever

and it made him, Danny, look the foolish one—as if he really did care about the silly conventions of yacht-club tennis.

Danny didn't get clobbered at all; Bradley did.

Danny's game was as consistently devastating as a monsoon. Bradley kept charging the net and Danny lobbed them back, over Bradley's head. Bradley said almost nothing but he looked determined as a bull in the ring. I sat on a bench by the side of the court, hugging my knees to my chest and wishing the slaughter would end quickly. At any other time I would have been pleased to watch Danny: his game was gratifying. I mean he never seemed to get thrown off balance and, once in a while when he reached for a long one, his arm seemed to stretch out another few inches, as if it were made of elastic.

Bradley did silly things like double-fault and call them himself, even if Danny hadn't noticed. He played the most *honest* game I ever saw. But he began to puff badly halfway through the match because Danny had him running all over the place, up and then back, then from one side to the other, and Bradley chased every single ball whether there was a chance or not. His shirt came out of his shorts and its long blue tail flapped on his rear end as he ran and his hair wouldn't stay out of his eyes so that he continually threw his head back like a flyblown horse. I felt so sorry for him I could hardly bear to watch.

I don't want to imply that Danny played a perfect game or anything like that. His service was uneven; he'd ace one time and next he'd fault twice and lose the point. And then, his forehand is awkward; he got into a bad habit when he first started playing tennis as a child and it worked so efficiently that he never tried to change. But it looks funny, as if he were hugging himself on every follow-through. A number of pros told him that he'd have even more power if he could alter his swing but he wouldn't even try.

Finally, *finally*, the match was over and Bradley had won only two out of eighteen games. But I will say for him: he was a good loser. As good a loser as Danny was a winner. Bradley even shook

hands with Danny and said something that sounded like a close-mouthed "good game."

I think Danny was sorry for what he had done, I mean about the white clothes. And I think, too, he didn't get as much pleasure from beating Bradley as he had anticipated. He said, "That's a pretty nifty backhand you've got, Brad," and then busily rubbed his face in a towel.

Bradley said, "Thanks." Then, turning to me, who had come up to take his hand, "How about that swim now, Nicky? I could really use it." In fact, he looked as if it wouldn't do him any harm to spend about three hours in the ocean, cooling off.

I started singing on the way to the beach—it was one of my few moments of gaiety all that week—but I soon stopped because Bradley looked so gloomy.

"I should have beat him," he said out loud to himself.

What could I say? "Yes"? "No"? I said, "Bunny, Danny's an absolute freak at tennis. Almost nobody beats him. Sometimes I wish he'd enter the nationals so he'd know what it's like to lose."

"Why doesn't he?" Bradley said.

"I don't know. He says it's because he doesn't like to compete."

"Crap!" Bradley shouted. "He eats it up, boy. I'd just love to be around the day he gets his."

Danny's antipathy to Bradley, like a wandering Staph germ, found in me an ideal site to start some trouble. And like a sore throat that goes away each morning after breakfast, it was something I refused to do anything about.

While I secretly wanted Danny to be more positively negative, if you know what I mean, Mother and Daddy overwhelmed us with approval. They did not even object to our going off in the car at night. Even if they believed me when I said we were going to the Club or the movies or dancing, they were being awfully cavalier, for them.

One night we had a disastrous encounter on the sand. Again, I was the determined one. Bradley drove, following my directions, with cautious precision, to a deserted stretch of sand Jimmy and

I had discovered on bicycles the week before, a place I was sure we would be alone. I wanted to test the depth of his reticence, to see if he could be as free as I had been with Farley Button. I think that I was just beginning to understand the reality of people, that old business about those who really live and those who only exist, a difference that might add up to *all* the difference.

But a little knowledge is not much help. And I was not ready to judge people with an open mind.

Bradley said, "Where we going, honey, lovers' lane?"

I said, "Yes, lovers' lane. We're lovers, aren't we?"

"You're my love and I'm yours," he answered. "You're all a man could ever dream of." He was off again.

"Thank you, Bunny dear. But we don't really know each other," I said and then hoped I hadn't tipped my hand. I didn't want it to happen that way.

"I know all I *need* to know about you, sweetie-pie; you're my girl."

I just couldn't comprehend: didn't he realize something was left out? For the first time I considered what I'd thought was impossible: Bradley might still be a (I always hate this term applied to men) virgin, that he might, quite literally, believe in waiting until after marriage for sex, as young people, for the sake of their own self-respect, are advised to do by magazine columnists. I stared out of my window into night and sand and stars. There were trillions and trillions of stars, more than all the grains of sand on all the beaches in all the world. They were fixed and watching, bright little flames of time, eternal and silent, the last, feelingless gods to whom I might be forced to pray. Oh stars, deliver me from my own incompetence.

I did not ask for the role of seducer; I wanted to be seduced; it was Bradley who should have teased and pleased and tempted and lured—not I. But he was turning out to be my constant straight-man. He wasn't lacking in virility but in knowing what to do with his small passion.

"You can stop the car now," I said, softly. "We're here."

"Let's get out," Bradley said. "I want to look at the ocean. Better take your sweater, honey—I can feel a breeze."

I drew my sweater over my shoulders and we both got out of the car and took off our shoes and walked down through the cooling sand to where the surf was spilling over the edge of the beach but it was warm there, and sweet, and I dropped my sweater. Bradley picked it up and tied its arms around his waist. And then he put his arms around me.

"Oh, Bunny," I whispered, "isn't it lovely here?"

"Yes," he said. "And you're as beautiful as the sky."

"You're star-struck, Bradley. Let's go and sit down."

We walked away from the ocean and sat down with our backs flat against a hard-packed wall of sand and Bradley began to touch my neck and then my shoulders and then he groped between the buttons of my shirt until he finally got *them* open and then he groped some more with my bra and finally had to give up on that. I touched the fastening open, smiling at him in the almost-dark. He looked very intent but not really as if he were enjoying himself. He stopped at my waist.

I had to prompt him: "Don't you want to . . . ?"

"Oh Nicky, dearest, may I?"

"Yes, Bunny."

So he tried. I had been wrong. This was not the first time for him but so close to it that experience for him meant hardly anything.

He couldn't be intrepid and so he failed to encounter the true Antoinette Hapgood, the girl Farley Button had run smack into with no trouble at all. He was so absorbed in the idea of what he was doing that he forgot not to think about it. It was really pretty miserable all around but I was *still* stupidly, desperately hopeful.

And Bradley was absolutely stricken. To him this was the worst calamity of all time. There was nothing I could do or say to console him.

"It's all right, Bunny," I said. "I love you, I loved it."

"No no no, I did not make you happy."

"Yes," I insisted, lying. And I didn't add, "and I didn't make you either." I don't believe in all this post-mortem business.

"You will despise me," he said.

"I do not despise you," I said. "Please let's stop talking about it this way. In fact, let's stop talking about it altogether. Next time will be even better." I felt like a marriage counselor or something. Why should I have to console him, especially when I was feeling so bad myself? It seemed to me he was saying all the things it was *my* right to say. Bradley, after all, was still Bradley: making love, playing tennis, being a house guest, eating eggs. Still Bradley.

"There won't be any next time," he announced, "until we are married."

"Oh Bunny," I cried, trying to hide the truth from myself, "that's not fair. It wasn't perfect only because it was the first time."

"No," he told me. "It was wrong because we should have waited."

It was hopeless. I began to cry, the tears spilling out my frustration with Bradley rather than a shame I did not feel.

"Please, darling, don't cry," he pleaded, "I know it's right this way. It won't be too long, I promise you, honey, not even a year."

On this incongruous note we left my beach and drove home. In the car you could almost hear the effort Bradley was making to reclaim his own virtue. And I, I was just inutterably disappointed; I was doomed to loving a man who did not know how to love me.

Bradley, thank goodness, had had the presence of mind to equip himself with proper precaution. But in fact he needn't have; my period started the following morning, greeting me early and unsuspected and throwing me into a gloom I had a difficult time shaking. But I'm positive that the curse was not responsible for our abstinence; had we been the world's last two survivors, stranded on an island in the middle of the Pacific, we would have waited. We would have waited till we were skeletons.

XII

THAT WEEKEND I never stopped being amazed at how buddy-buddy Daddy was with Bradley. He actually started calling Bradley "son." Daddy seemed, in a way that was odd to me, relieved, and it is only recently, when I started thinking seriously about everything that happened, that I began to understand why. You see, if Daddy is gingerbread, then Bradley is angel-food cake; Daddy could be absolutely confident that Bradley could never capture me entirely, that if I gave my allegiance to Bradley there would still be an awful lot left over for Daddy.

But that summer I needed Bradley's sweets, assurances, and safety. And then, Bradley was still unfamiliar enough to be strange and I have always found strangeness to be, alas, intensely desirable.

Bradley was everybody's compromise candidate. He was acceptable to Mummy because he'd been born in the right sort of family and he didn't have any disagreeable habits like wearing a beard, studying art, or flirting with other girls. Daddy, as I've said, would have voted for him because he would never be competition for Daddy in any personality contest and because he knew that his daughter would be perfectly "safe" married to Bradley. And then Danny, having got me alone for a brief moment

one afternoon, indicated that even he, Danny, my spirit's last ally, was almost convinced that he too should vote for Bradley Evers.

It seems I had this compulsion to make Danny my confessor; I told him all about me and Jimmy and me and Beau. I imagine I wanted Danny to tell me, after hearing about my sloppy behavior, that here was clear evidence I *shouldn't* marry Bradley. But for some reason, that afternoon, Danny turned about, taking another, totally unexpected position. That is, he didn't come right out and say, "Watch it, Nicky, your heels are getting awfully round, it's time to retire." But something like that. As he put it, "Jimmy's okay, Nicky, he's a nice guy, really. But Christ! Beau! What a jerkass. And you let him." Danny made his I-think-I'm-going-to-puke face.

"Well, no, not really."

"What do you mean, 'not really'? You either did or you didn't."

"Well, I sort of spent the evening on his bed. But nothing happened." (This refers to an incident of a few weeks before that I don't feel I need go into; you get the idea.)

"I don't know which one of you is crazier," Danny said. "Listen, Nicky, you're going to just have to cut it out. Mom knows."

I experienced one of those moments when you think you've fallen through a trap door in the floor and someone has come up behind you and thrown a black bag over your head. "Knows what?" I whispered.

"Well, for instance, knows that Beau Oltarsh is after you and you haven't exactly told him to go piss up a rope."

"How does she know?" I asked. I should have been more perceptive; of course she must know—didn't she make knowing her daily business?

"I don't have any idea. The point is, she's got her wind up and if you don't start toeing the line—her line—she's going to tell Dad and then God knows what the old man will think up for you. No kidding, Nicky, they *already* think you're some kind of loose woman. I mean, take it easy." Danny went and pulled a few grass swords out of the sand and stabbed them into his palm.

"Do you think so too?" My voice sounded hollow. I walked behind my brother across the top of the dunes.

"Oh shit, Nicky. What do you think I am—your moral drill instructor?" Danny twisted the grasses into a rope and tossed them away. "All I'm saying is that what you've been up to is perfectly obvious to anybody with two eyes and a head. I mean it looks lousy if you really want to know. Maybe you *ought* to marry Bradley. At least he'd keep an eye on you." It must have taken a lot of guts for Danny to say this. I know he hated to be on "their" side. And after all, wasn't it he who had practically thrown me at Jimmy?

"All right," I said. "You're right. I don't know what's the matter with me. Yes I do. I've missed Bradley. It's all because we've been apart so much."

"If you really think that," Danny said, turning to look at me, "I feel sorry for you, Nicky." And he just walked away from me, down towards the sea, which pounded and roared and then crept up to him like a pet lion. I watched him sadly for a long time.

The afternoon before Bradley left Nantucket we got into the car again, to drive off alone together. But this time it was not to make love but to talk (with Bradley, the two activities are necessarily disparate). I had a hunch he meant to talk about marriage and, idiot that I was, I could not stop him. Bradley sat stiff and formal, his two hands firmly on the wheel, his blue oxford shirt open at his throat where his Adam's apple hoppity-hopped with each word. "Darling, how would you like to set a date?" (hippity-hoppity hop).

"Next spring," I blurted. "I've always wanted to get married in May."

"Why so long, honey?" He seemed to have forgotten that he had, himself, said "a year."

"Oh Bunny, I want to see if I can do anything with acting."

"But your father. He's said you can't, hasn't he?"

"Well, that's part of it, Bradley. I still think I can talk him into it—I've always been able to before. I asked him at the wrong time

that's all, and I haven't given him a chance to change his mind. I've got to try, Bunny, I really do."

"Is it worth it?"

"Bradley," I cried, "of course it is. It means everything to me."

"Everything?" His voice actually caught.

"You know what I mean," I said too quickly, "everything besides us. But we're already settled, we're in love, we're going to get married. But nothing is settled about my acting."

"But Nicky. Honey, I don't see where the conflict is." Bradley was getting all mixed up in my own dilemma. For, after all, there *was* no real conflict. If I'd really wanted to get married, I'd have gotten married and *then* tackled my ambition. The one thing had nothing to do with the other. We explored the situation for ten miles and then decided to turn around and come home, and by that time I had rationalized it for both of us: Bradley agreed that May would be a divine month for a wedding, and I was so relieved at putting it off for nine months that I permitted Bradley to start naming our children.

I was much more an actress than even I suspected.

Bradley was more starchy and formal now that he could claim something as interesting as a fiancée. At dinner that night (I remember it was a great lobster salad and mine had to go out to the kitchen uneaten) if Bradley was nervous he disguised it under a cloak of impeccable manners and polite talk. He waited until Daddy swallowed his last swallow of coffee and then made this announcement:

"Sir, I wonder if I might have a word with you." I sat looking into my coffee cup. Mercifully, Danny was out. Mother coughed and rang for Anna to clear the table.

Daddy beamed. "Certainly, son. Shall we take a post-prandial? It's a fine night—your last night with us, is it?" It was all so corny. I felt just like someone in Junior Miss.

"Yes sir, Mr. Hapgood," Bradley said sadly.

"I'll just get my pipe and be with you in a shake, Bradley," Daddy said, disappearing into his bedroom.

Bradley came over to where I was standing by a window, wishing it were ten stories up so I could jump out. He reached for my hand and whispered, "I'm going to tell him, ask him now. Wish me luck, sweetheart."

"You're very sweet, Bunny, to ask Daddy like this, but honestly you have nothing to worry about. Of course he'll say yes, he'll be perfectly delighted."

Of course Daddy said yes. He was perfectly delighted. They returned from their walk in about fifteen minutes smiling all over the place, Bradley as if he'd just bought the biggest-breasted girl in the village, and Daddy as if he'd talked his prospective son-in-law into taking only one cow home along with the bride. In other words, both of them disgustingly self-satisfied. Mother was all fluttery and told Bradley he should call her May and everybody kissed everybody else and Danny was still out and didn't hear the news till the next morning when he swallowed it at breakfast as he might have an egg that was not quite cooked.

As soon as Daddy got back to his office on Monday he started his secretary compiling lists and a few weeks later, when we returned to Fairmont, Mother began to arrange for the arrangements.

And there it was: I'd trussed myself up to a fare-thee-well and given my parents the end of the rope to hold. I was a fiancée, again. Like Athena, I was celebrated and where before I'd been breathless with pleasure, I was now breathless with fear. I was at the center of a whirlpool.

Then came a period of my life that seems to take it takes to say "he died" or "he went ban' prince of the realm" is nothing, yet it ma tracted agony or pleasure. Time shortens time, distorts it. For example, say it is announced that Mrs. So-and-So had a son, Rodney Bruce. That is the fact. What is left out is what the fact represents. You simply do not have the time, nor the inclination, to give the fact any real meaning: that the mother did not want another baby in the first place and threw up throughout her pregnancy;

that the father was so nervous taking his wife to the hospital that he drove their car past a red light and hit a boy on a bicycle, knocking him unconscious; that the mother was obliged to wait in the lobby of the hospital until advanced labor made her lie down on the cold marble floor where she screamed and carried on until a nurse came over to her and said, "Be quiet, you, and for heaven's sake, keep your ankles crossed. You don't want to have your baby right here, do you?"; that the mother was finally carried up to the delivery room where her baby was delivered septically and, born with its umbilical cord twisted around its neck, had to be revived with an oxygen mask while the mother was being given a transfusion which just saved her life; and that afterwards the mother went into a frightful slump and had to go to a psychiatric clinic twice a week to keep her from committing suicide. Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So announce the arrival of Rodney Bruce. You see?

What does it mean, then, to say that Antoinette Hapgood was engaged to Bradley Evers? It doesn't even mean that she wore a diamond ring set for her by Tiffany and Co. after three conferences; that photographs of her taken by a New York City photographer (seventy-five dollars for three prints) appeared, streaky or blotched, in a few metropolitan newspapers and in several out-of-town ones like Boston, St. Louis, San Francisco; that plans for the wedding, reception, food, clothes, and flowers began to pile up on her mother's writing table like the blueprints for a skyscraper.

Well, maybe it meant all those things to somebody else but for me it meant what Danny calls The Horrors. I kept telling myself they were just the premarital jitters that every girl has, that they were as much a part of the ritual as the bachelor party. I felt like a voodoo doll stuck all over with pins. And Bradley only made me feel worse.

I realize that I must have been miserable for months. And there were moments when worse than the worst happened. I mean, you think you can feel only so bad and then one more misery comes over you and you discover you were wrong.

Like the night just before Danny went off to Yale, when he took me downtown for what he proposed as a farewell beer but which turned out to be a resumption of the kind of painful conversation we had had in Nantucket, the time he told me that Mother knew about my various promiscuities. I had, meanwhile, begun to believe that I really *was* promiscuous. I mean, if so many people thought so—even Danny—there must be something to it. On the other hand, I held onto my old buried faith that *anything* I did was all right. You can see how confusing all this was to me, how these opposing pressures made me finally admit that I did not know, myself, *what* kind of girl I was.

So when Danny started in on me again—and I couldn't see it in any way then but an attempt, on his part, to crack my self-confidence—I got mad. I let loose with some fancy language I'd been saving up since Red Ridge. It was all right for Danny to (1) not be crazy about Bradley Evers (2) hope to distract me via Jimmy Paltz (3) warn me against losing my reputation. But when he began acting as if I weren't *worth* saving I really couldn't take it.

I said, "Danny, why the hell don't you mind your own business?"

And he said, "Nicky, I think you must be going screwy or something. You act just like a beat-up old divorcee who's afraid she can't get one man anymore so she wants all of them. You don't have to worry about finding a husband, Nicky. You're still young, for Christ sake. You got nice tits, an okay face, and you can do something besides boil an egg and go to bed."

"Like what, like what?"

"Act, for god's sake. Isn't that what you're always yelling about?"

"Oh," I said, "that."

"Yes, that."

"You mean like at the Beach Plum? Balls is all I can say to that."

"What do you want? To be Julie Harris overnight? My God,

you're impatient. You think someone's going to come to your house and discover you? It just doesn't work that way, except in the movies."

"I don't know," I said. "I mean of course I know. I want to work to be an actress and I want to marry Bradley."

"And you want to go to bed without looking to see who you're going to bed with, if you ask me." Danny ordered another beer and glared at a man at the next table who seemed to be listening to us.

"Well, I didn't ask you, I didn't ask anybody. I don't know why everyone thinks he has to volunteer as my advisor. Danny, listen: *please leave me alone*. If you don't, I don't think I'll ever be able to do anything by myself." Danny's constant advice was having the curious effect of shutting off communication between the good little girl I had always been and the horrid one I knew I could be—and was, for three disastrous days. I was worried.

Danny saw that I was nearer the edge than he'd suspected, so he dropped the subject and, to cheer me up, told me about this plan he had, The Hapgood Program of Tranquil Positivism. He and another boy were going to get on *The Record*, at Yale, and put over the plan subliminally. By the end of the first year, he said, the entire undergraduate body should be walking around tranquilly positive and positively tranquil.

"You're kidding," I said, having only half listened.

"Nope," he said. "Not kidding in the least."

I wasn't sure. But I was sure I envied him his fancies and his freedoms, his ability to get involved and still to see himself in the middle of things clearly, like an astronomer gazing at a favorite star.

Early in April I went to visit the Evers in Georgia, a sort of shape-of-things-to-come experience that shook me up but could not shake me loose. I dressed demurely. You know, navy blue suit, gold circlet pin, white blouse, red kid pumps, navy purse, and natural straw hat with a fistfull of cotton flowers on top. I carried my tiny fur jacket over one arm and in my suitcase I carried

a crystal cream pitcher that Mummy had bought at Steuben. There wasn't a single detail that wasn't right.

I cannot say often enough that never once, in the entire period I was engaged to Bradley, was I ever free from the feeling that I was an actress playing a part in a play (maybe this was my way of compensating for Daddy's stand against the stage). And worse, never once did I sit down and examine this strange sensation and say, "Now why am I feeling this way and isn't it terribly wrong?" Never once, that is, until it was too late to step aside gracefully. I just panicked.

This time Bradley met me at the airport. Flying down was ghastly—winds and rain all the way from New York to Atlanta so that when you looked at the wing it seemed to belong to another plane. When I stepped onto the ground I was shaky and perspiring: I was actually glad to be there. I threw my arms around Bradley's neck and dropped a couple of grateful tears into the old-fashioned bouquet of violets in a Schrafft's doily that he pushed towards me. The kisses I plastered him with were as much in relief to be on the ground as in passion. We got into Bradley's convertible.

"I told Mom and Dad I wanted to come meet you alone," he said. "This way I can have you all to myself for a little while." He beamed at me. "I need to look at you."

"Hello Bunny," I said. "I wish I didn't feel so nervous."

"Oh honey, I wouldn't love you if you weren't a little nervous." (Which was a lie: he would have loved me however I was.) "After all, I'm introduc' my bride to my folks. My sweet little Yankee bride." Bradley's accent had thickened like fudge sauce forgotten in the ice box.

Bradley's uncritical devotion to me had this curious hold over me. He loved me and all my selfish faults to the point where I was obliged to say to myself: No one will ever love me so much again; I had better cling to him or I will be lost. And all the time the Danny in me whispered evil things like: What kind of a man is it who will never find fault with you, who will never dislike

anything you do, who cannot even tell you when your nose is shining or your vanity is showing? Can you marry this man?

Of course, it's simple to say, now, that it wasn't Bradley Evers I needed but the things he represented to me. He was *my* compromise candidate more than anyone else's.

"Well," I said, sounding like a cheer leader, "let's get it over with."

"They're a pretty nice family, if I do say so myself, so don't you go minding their teasing about you being a Yankee; it's their way of getting to know you."

I thought his statement didn't make much sense but I said nothing; I'd wait and see. Nothing that happened on the outside, after all, could be as bad as what was going on on the inside.

But then, the confrontation did have its sticky side. Mrs. Evers was okay—no, *more* than that—she was really kind and sweet. To be honest, I had expected someone who would be horrid about me. You know, I was stealing her oldest son, I was her rival; she would be insidious and insinuating, maybe deliberately try to make me feel uncomfortable in her house. No, she was affectionate, if a little vague. It was Mr. Evers, or "Dad" as he instructed me to call him even as we were shaking hands, who spread all that phony Southern comfort and sunshine.

"Well, well, well, so this is the little lady who's goin' to marry our boy Bradley. Welcome, child. Brad, she's as pretty as a peach." Mr. Evers, a tall man with a bloated body and silver hair like a department store Santa Claus, grasped my elbow and steered me into the living room, which was crammed, funeral-parlor style, with hothouse flowers. A vase occupied every table, the piano, the bookcase, the console TV-Hi-fi-Radio, and the portable leather-with-brass-studs bar.

"What beautiful flowers," I said.

"Breed 'em and grow 'em myself, honey," Dad told me. "One of my many hobbies." He paused for a moment, as if waiting for me to ask what the other ones were. "The other ones are huntin', fishin' (tie my own flies, of course), and French wines. But my

favorite hobby is bein' host to the friends of my two big boys. I must say they have mighty good taste or it wouldn't be such a pleasure for me."

Mrs. Evers, looking distinctly pained, said, "It's very nice to meet you, Antoinette. May I call you Nicky, dear? I know Bradley does." I nodded and said, "Of course." Mrs. Evers went on, "You'll probably want to be seeing your room, won't you? And freshen up?" I nodded again and thanked her. Bradley had so far said nothing. The whole thing had the feel of a dream that was not quite number-one nightmare quality.

"Ah, Lubelle," Mr. Evers cried, on his way to the bar, "don't take Miss Nicky away just yet, why we've hardly said a word to each other. In fact, I was just about to mix her a welcomin' libation. *You'll* have one, won't you, Lu?"

"No thank you, Henry. And I really think Nicky would like to wash up and unpack her things first. Wouldn't you, dear? There's plenty of time."

Again I nodded, grateful to Mrs. Evers for supervising my escape.

Mrs. Evers walked with me up the curving front stairs, through a carpeted hall hung, honest-to-god, with ancestors who gave me a spooky once-over while I was giving Mrs. Evers one. I decided that she had a closetful of printed silks, one of which the cook got every year just before Easter and that she had a heart full of troubles not any of which were ever given away.

Mrs. Evers preceded me into the guest room. "In here, Nicky. We call it the rose room." She wasn't kidding. The room had rosebud wallpaper with matching curtains and four-poster canopy. The upholstery on the chairs was the same material. On the night-table were tiny sweetheart roses waiting for me in a bud vase. I even found roses on the toilet seat cover in my bathroom. And rose-splashed towels.

"It's perfectly lovely."

Mrs. Evers said, "Let me know if there's anything you need. We'll all be waiting for you in the living room but please take

your time, dear, there's no hurry at all." Then she came over to me and took my hand and said, "We're truly happy to have you here with us, Nicky; you're a lovely surprise." I knew she meant it; and there was something so pathetic, so sad about her eyes. After she left I was aware of the heaviest cloud of perfume I'd ever been under. It was as if it were going to rain drops of Chanel No. 5.

I "freshened up" (that expression always makes me think of sticking celery stalks in ice water) and went back downstairs. As Mrs. Evers said, they were all waiting for me, drinking the so-called libation. They all stopped talking when they saw me. "To the bride!" Dad shouted (he rarely spoke in a normal tone) and rushed at me with a glassful of something brown and cloudy, as if he were Zeus and I, Leda. I side-stepped him as I accepted the drink (a rather neat maneuver) and crossed over to Bradley, linking my arm with his. At that moment he was my rock and my comfort and my true love. (Yes, Virginia, there *were* moments like that.)

Wickersham Evers said, "How do you do it, Brad? Dad, you should have seen this girl as Athena up there in that Yankee female seminary. She was the greatest goddess you ever did see (though I never saw a statue with so many god-damn clothes on)."

"I didn't think you noticed, Wick," I said.

"Why whatever do you mean, Nicky? Of course I noticed. What do you think I was doin' there?"

I could have told him but I refrained. It wasn't that kind of party and besides Mrs. Evers was looking unhappy again. I thought, oh God, when do we eat?

"It was just my luck that I couldn't see you as Athena, Nicky," Bradley said. "Did you know that I even bought a plane ticket and was all ready to hop out to the airport when Tommy Garringer talked me out of going. I'd still be at Tech, slaving away taking exams if it hadn't been for Tommy, bless his soul."

"I'm sure you were perfectly lovely," Mrs. Evers said. "And

what a gratifying thing for your family. They must have been very proud of you, dear."

I couldn't stand all this talk about the Athena business; I was being smothered by compliments which meant less than nothing to me, that had absolutely nothing to do with me. I began to have the sensation that the Evers family, all of them, were closing in on me, ready to pounce and eat me for lunch. I found I could hardly breathe. Then a voice sing-song-ed in back of me:

"Lunch is on the table, Mrs. Evers, ma'am," and as we trooped into the dining room for lunch, I took a deep breath and told myself sternly that I'd just *have* to make it through the rest of the week end.

That week end I was "taken" everywhere, except to the bathroom. I felt as if the Evers had appointed themselves my bodyguards or else they were holding me as some sort of hostage but were going to sacrifice me in the end anyway. Even Wickersham, who I suspected really disliked me because I was not a Southerner and held "radical" views about such things as racial rights and so forth, fell all over himself making me feel "to home," urging more food on me, asking if I needed anything, helping me in and out of cars, etc., etc. And always with a nasty smirk as if to say, "If Bradley can't get it up, just come to me, honey-pie."

Anyway the night after the day I got there, there was a big dance for us at the Evers' club. I think everyone in the city who was white and who earned over ten thousand dollars a year was invited—and most of them showed up. You could not really call the Evers snobs, they simply were determined to have the fanciest, most memorable party in years. I think Dad sighed with relief when he discovered that I wasn't plain or bowlegged or something like that; it would have been embarrassing for him to have his "boy" publicly promised to a girl who looked as if no one else would have her. No, he was undoubtedly congratulating himself on being spared that humiliation; little did he suspect that later, after the disaster, he would suffer a much worse humiliation, a defeat of the Evers' honor. Southerners are always thinking about

their honor (as if they were still practicing the art of chivalry), always worrying about how they look to other (white) people—all that kind of what Danny calls *ess aitch eye tee*. I don't say they have a monopoly on nonsense but it sort of sticks out more down there, like a Negro in a crowd of white people. Honestly, if I ever get married, it's going to be to a man who never joined an eating club and thinks crab grass is pretty. There are so many more important things to think about than whether your son is going to be jilted by a Yankee. Fallout, for instance, and, though I'm a fine one to talk, dignity.

Mother had bought me a perfectly gorgeous dress at Bergdorf's: it was short, simple, and elegant, a lime organdy with a huge taffeta sash—demure and sexy at the same time. I took a bath with pink bath salts in it and then dressed in front of a large oval mirror in the rose room. I studied myself in the mirror—it was a lovely mirror, flattering and suggestive, with a wavy gray sheen and it threw back at me a sort of romanticized reflection—and looked for signs of happiness in my face. There were none at all. Again, I blamed this on the “jitters” and tried to convince myself that I was merely nervous from the excitement and fuss. And yet, here is what I was really thinking: I look lovely, my dress is dazzling, I am like a new green tree with new and delicate leaves, I am a garden of spring flowers, I will never be so pretty again. Why do I appear covered with love and yet feel so naked? Why hasn't love covered me with warmth, why do I feel so cold and wasted? Where is the prize I've been promised? I felt like Emma Bovary and I wasn't even married yet!

I was trembling with misery and I felt I wasn't going to be able to make it through the evening: surely I would break down and give myself away. So I sat on the floor in front of the mirror and lectured myself into a rigid state of mind. I told myself that it was decided I should treat tonight like a play and I was going to star in it and my part was fixed though the lines would have to be improvised. A good actress could take any situation and create

her own lines, and I was a good actress. It was a desperate but plausible way out.

And so I encouraged myself sufficiently to float downstairs, à la Scarlett O'Hara, a walking dream of loveliness. Dad came over and kissed my fingers moistly, Bradley just grinned, Wickersham whistled (he is so childish and so predictable) and Lubelle Evers said softly, "How enchanting you look, Nicky, what a beautiful dress," (which would have pleased my mother). I wavered, thinking maybe I ought to break my dishonest silence. Mrs. Evers would be the one most deeply hurt when she found out and she, for some reason, was the one I most wanted to spare.

It is an odd thing but I was certain that if I'd been the plainest, pimpest girl in the world, wearing my mother's castoff ten-year-old dress, faded and out of fashion, walking down a musty old flight of steps in a tenement building, into the arms of the milkman, who was my lover, I would have felt as if I were flying up to heaven. I realize this sounds terribly obvious but to me it was, at the moment Bradley took my arm, silently, at the foot of that graceful, overpolished staircase, a revelation. I was like Molnár's swan, my own prisoner.

Why was I convinced I was at the point of no return? Wouldn't it have been fairly simple (though possibly disagreeable) to tell this sandy-haired rabbit that I felt we ought to wait, that my agitation was too real to mean anything good or promising and that I was choking? Well, perhaps it would have been simple for someone else but for me it was impossible. I could not speak or move or make a sign or anything. I just kept winding myself tighter and tighter inside the rope, taking sweet unhappy pleasure in the specter of my own helplessness.

So what should have been one of the memorable nights in my life was merely a nightmare.

It was a dreamy night, the air was gently warm, and in back of the clubhouse a pink and white light sprawled over an impeccable lawn. I refuse to be dishonest and say it wasn't elegant, even beautiful. Whether you like the implications or not, country

clubs can be terribly alluring. Artificial and unnecessary maybe, but still alluring—if you're in the mood or are the right kind of person to appreciate it. I was neither.

Bradley Evers adored me openly, of course. He was visibly proud of me, the embodiment of his good fortune and taste. He made me shake hands with everybody—it seemed like hundreds, it probably was. And honest to God, most of his friends looked at me as if they were a gang of cannibals who had inadvertently invited a missionary (me) to eat with them. All that jazz about Southern hospitality is just great, but it seems to me that if you're a real stranger the Southerner automatically assumes you're going to start baiting him about the Negro Problem (as they insist on calling it) so he's all set for you with his hard mouth and suspicious eyes. Of course the Supreme Court decision didn't make it any easier for them and of course some Northerners *do* give them a hard time, but still and all I wish they would stop acting like *The Privileged Race*. But I made a point of saying I had been invited; it was not as if they were about to heave me into the stew pot.

Bradley never acted strange with me, though. I guess that's part of what drew me to him in the first place. He's very open and he enjoys meeting people from all over, not just the kids he grew up with. I don't know where he picked up this generosity unless it was from his mother. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Evers seemed, that night, somehow "invited" like me. She was definitely the odd one in her own house. I'm still not altogether clear about it but I think that in Mrs. Evers, and, to a lesser extent in Bradley, there is a curiosity and an appealing warmth, only underneath Lubelle's is a fire, while underneath Bradley's only one tiny flame.

After the reception we ate and danced. We sat down to eat; it was formal, not a buffet; it was like a wedding. Bradley and I reigned at a long head table, flanked by his relatives and close friends, while the rest of the guests sat at round tables spread out in front of us like a bunch of lily pads floating in a swimming pool. It was pink all over: pink flowers in pink glass globes, one

to a table, pink boleros on the waiters. Pink cake. Pink cheeks. Pink ice cream. Everything pink but the bus boys, who were black.

The food was really pretty fancy. At least it looked and smelled delicious but when I held a forkful of crabmeat (dressed in pink mayonnaise) to my lips, my throat closed right up tight. Just like the time I was agonizing over Cleopatra. I knew that even if I could get my mouth open I would still not have won; my revulsion went way down.

"Eat up, young lady," Mr. Evers shouted at me. He'd been hanging over me all night.

"Doesn't she have a chahmin' smile?" A whisper among cousins floated up the side of the table and sat in my ear like a flea.

"Or we'll think you don't like our vittles," Mr. Evers and bourbon continued. Dad was more and more assuming the shape and noise of a caricature. I decided he was ghastly. I thought with horror, is this what I've saved myself for?

You have to eat, you are given away and lost if you don't eat. I might have made some sort of excuse, like being allergic to seafood or having a sudden stomach-ache or simply being too excited to eat. But somehow I felt eating was symbolic of my integrity and that if I did not eat they would know I was a fake, that lights would flash and sirens sound. This is the kind of nonsense I have had to put up with all my life. I would have made an ideal nun: I would be testing myself twenty-four hours a day, forever questioning my constancy. And I would enjoy the deprivations.

I finally managed to force open a small hole down which I sent some of that beautiful dinner. My stomach revolted; it might have been dog food. So just before coffee (as long, that is, as I could hold off) I excused myself and went into the powder room and threw up crabmeat, cornish hen, wild rice, romaine lettuce, and peppermint-stick ice cream into a pink toilet bowl. After I washed the perspiration from my forehead and rinsed my mouth and washed my hands with magnolia-scented soap, I

walked, trembling, to a pink satin love seat and sat, trembling, down. I was sure I needed only a moment to recover.

I heard a rustle and Lubelle Evers stood beside me. Her eyes seemed red and watery. I didn't know how she got there so quietly; it made me jump.

"Nicky, are you all right? I noticed at dinner you seemed a bit peaked." She said peak-ed. Something a bit off about Mrs. Evers startled me, just a shading, like the difference between what you get with a red spot and a yellow.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I felt a little sick but I'm okay now. The excitement." I looked up at her to see if she believed me.

"Too much excitement," she repeated. "Here, have some of this. It will settle your stomach." Sweet and matter-of-fact, Lubelle Evers took from her brocade evening bag the prettiest flask I'd ever seen. It was like a jewel. Under the circumstances it was absurd of her to carry it because there was more than enough available. As a matter of fact, the place was overflowing with champagne, scotch, bourbon, gin, planter's punches. If it all had been poured out on the ground, we would have been up to our knees in booze.

"No thank you, Mrs. Evers," I said in a tone that indicated I was perfectly accustomed to seeing ladies toting whisky in their evening bags.

Mrs. Evers said, "It wouldn't hurt you at all," and went to the basin and rinsed out a pink plastic cup and poured some whisky into it and drank it off, quick and neat, looking at me over the rim of the cup. When she was finished she smiled at me sadly.

"Well," she said, "now you know my secret and I, incidentally, know yours."

At that moment I loved her. I wished she were my mother. I also was certain that, though she may have been a fire, she was terrified of being extinguished. It was my intermission and for a moment I dropped my role: I began to cry.

"Nicky, child, you mustn't cry," she said.

"Why not?"

"In the first place," she said, as if she were giving a lecture she had delivered for years, "it doesn't get you anywhere, except in deeper. In the second," and she looked into the cup and frowned to see it was empty, "once you let go you're finished. I've never been able to fathom the reason, Nicky, but I'm sure, just as sure as I am that in two minutes this cup will be filled again, that us women get more than a fair share of . . . well, what my mother used to call God's bite. And it starts young, oh, very young."

I was suddenly aware that compared to Mrs. Evers, I was a novice at unhappiness, that it took a certain training and application. I felt a little better for me and much worse for her.

"You know, Nicky, I wanted to be an actress too, when I was your age. I actually played summer stock for a while. I was *The Philadelphia Story* type, Katie Hepburn from the deep South. I remember how hard I worked to get rid of my accent."

"You were very good, weren't you?"

"No better or worse than most. I didn't have the chance to get nearly as good as I thought I should be. But I had a terrible ambition—much too fierce, I imagine it affected everything I did. And then Henry showed up and swept me out of the theater like an old candy wrapper." Her voice went into a low monotone as she said this.

"But you must have wanted to get married and have children and all the rest of what goes with it?"

"Well, yes and no. And no." She looked into the cup again and refilled it and drank it up with a little pucker of her delicate, rosy mouth. When she'd swallowed she said solemnly: "Don't marry Bradley, if you wouldn't die for him. That's all I can say to you."

I was stunned by her headlong honesty; I didn't want her to see how close she was to the truth. After all, I had come there to be alone and most certainly not to make out of this powder room a pink confessional. If I'd been prepared to face my terror with someone else it would probably have been with Mrs. Evers. The simple fact was I was not ready.

"Mrs. Evers," I said, trying to sound as if I had not heard her

last statement, "I think I ought to be getting back; I don't want Brad to start worrying about me." I noticed Lubelle Evers' hands were trembling as she rinsed out the cup for the last time.

"Of course," she said. "Come on, then, we'll go back together. Just wait one moment for me while I fix my face." She combed her hair and powdered her nose in little dabs. She took a tiny vial of perfume from her bag and put the stopper to her tongue. Then she stood up. "Ready," she said, and smiled so wisely at me that abruptly I felt challenged; I resented her trespassing. How could she understand more about me than I did? How could she assume that I wouldn't die for Bradley, just because she was an old lush and wouldn't die for Bradley's father? She had it all wrong and furthermore she was a busybody.

But we walked out together, just like mother and daughter.

The night and the dance went on. And on. I danced with a lot of very attractive men, who cut in on Bradley so rapidly that I didn't have a chance to do anything but change my expression for them. If I hadn't been engaged I would have had a marvelous time, but the knowledge that I was not free kept intruding, like the thought of an imminent appointment with the dentist. The kiss Bradley gave me at the entrance to the guest room at three-thirty in the morning was a hungry kiss.

The next morning I woke up about ten o'clock feeling heavy. I think when you're happy you wake up feeling almost weightless, as if you could fly into any task and out again with no effort at all. But that morning as I lay in my room with millions of birds peeping and trilling outside the window as if there were no tomorrow, each arm weighed a hundred pounds and each leg a ton. I heard sounds, soft and complacent, float up from downstairs into my flowered prison and presently the smells of melon and bacon and coffee (just about my favorite smells) followed the muffled noise, and still I imagined I was no more than a large stone or a cockroach lying on its back in bed, unable to move.

It wasn't hunger or eagerness or anything like that which finally pried me out of bed: just my overactive sense of propriety, saying

you must get up or they'll think you're sick and need a doctor. What I really needed was to be shaken by some giant till my head got some sense into it and I was thrown free.

I ate my melon and bacon and drank my coffee with Bradley (the others had tactfully excused themselves), bravely drove into the country with him, ate lunch at an elegant resort hotel, swam and played tennis at the club, came back to the Evers' for cocktails and dinner, and then went to a sedate party with Wickersham and his date, an empty-headed little bitch named Cindy-Lu, who kept slithering around all the men while she dispatched Wick on various silly errands. I smiled throughout, I'll bet I was the smilingest girl they had ever seen. Before going to bed that night I felt I was removing my smile the way I would a set of uppers or a hair piece.

And *still* I could not do anything about it. I and Mrs. Evers and my parents and my fear of kicking up a storm held me as immobile as if I'd been stuffed into a tiny bird cage.

The few days with Bradley and his family came to an end, seeming like forever. Gloomily Bradley drove me to the airport and then clung to me so fiercely that I thought for a moment he suspected my treachery. But when he waved there was no sign that anything troubled him other than our separation.

XIII

DURING THE TRIP I began to miss Bradley, and by the time I walked through the front door of our house and into Daddy's arms I was so confused that I started to cry again. (I think I cried more during my engagement than I had before and since put together.) Daddy and Mummy closed in around me to comfort me with smiles and soothing noises, not knowing what was the matter with me. Danny insisted on rushing me out, ostensibly to a movie but really to talk to me. (Danny is one of those boys that some girls call a "doll," a name I used to tease him about; but secretly I agree with those girls: he is a doll. I also used to wish he weren't my brother so I could marry him when I grew up.)

And Danny himself was so grown up. His shoulders and hips had settled neatly into a good strong body and his trousers were long enough at last. I suddenly saw him as someone else's husband—which depressed me. He had taken me to a drugstore on the wrong side of Main Street, the part of town that always makes me uncomfortable. The houses there are scabby and lopsided and the people who live in them look tired and gray, as if they only worked and went to bed so they could get up at dawn to start work again and the routine would never vary for the rest

of their lives. They made me uncomfortable because I felt, quite simply, that it wasn't fair they should be gray while I was pink. Anyway, Danny had chosen this part of town for some unexplained reason but he was right if he did it to augment the generally depressed mood that I could feel settling around me like a heavy cloak. I felt like some sad character in a sad book.

Danny said, after ordering coffee for both of us and a hamburger for himself, "Nicky, I've got a great girl these days. She wants to meet you."

"What's her name?"

"Penny Johnson," he said. "She's a sophomore at Mount Holyoke. She's got blue eyes and blond hair. Like you. The only thing I'm skeptical about is she wants six children." I could tell he was trying to put me at ease before getting down to business. "Here, I took this picture of her a couple of weeks ago." Danny reached into his hip pocket for his wallet and shoved it across the table. There was Penny Johnson sitting on a stone wall in shorts and printed blouse, beaming at the photographer, pretty and bright as a daisy. A daisy girl.

"She's awfully cute," I said, handing the wallet back to him.

"Damn right," he said. "You'll meet her next week, she's coming here for her spring vacation. She's staying with us."

"This must be lets-take-a-trip month," I said.

"So?"

"So nothing. You haven't asked me anything about my trip. So I'll tell you." I was beginning to feel defensive. "It was crazy. Mr. Evers is a television version of a Kentucky Colonel, you know, a you-aller, who's this fellow Picasso type, with wandering hand trouble. If he were one tenth as attractive as he thinks he is he'd still be repulsive. Mrs. Evers, on the other hand, is quite special but she's a secret drinker and carries a supply around with her in her purse just like a little revolver. Bradley, I found out, takes after his mother—except for the drinking. Wickersham Evers is, as you already know, the end. But then I'm not going to marry Wickersham. I had an interesting time, to say the least."

"You had fun, eh? And how's the boy? How's old Brad, the bunny rabbit?"

"Danny," I said, "I promise you I'm not going to tell you anything if you act like this. Bradley's going to be my husband, for goodness sake."

"Okay," he said, "only take it easy."

"I'll admit I'd prefer *not* to live in Atlanta."

"Well," he drawled, "that's something, now we're getting somewhere. So how are you going to pull that off?"

"I didn't say I *wasn't* going to live there. I said if I had my choice of places to live I wouldn't *choose* Atlanta. What we've decided is after we're married Bradley's going to go on working for his father for a few years and save some money and then we'll move North and he'll find another job. If things get too rough Daddy will help us."

"You've got it all figured," Danny said. "Crap!"

"Danny, please."

"No, kiddo. Listen, Nicky, I want to tell you a few things that you've ignored. I have to tell you and if you want to take a crack at me later that's okay too. But listen to me, please, please listen." He took a deep breath. "If you marry Bradley Evers do you have any idea what you'll be like inside of ten years? No, I'll give it five. Well, in the first place you'll have two or three kids—right away and close together not because you really want them then but because all your friends are having their children young these days. You must grow up with your children or you're not being fair to them. Next, you'll be a member of the Garden Club, probably a vice-president, and you'll be in the D.A.R. You know of course that Dad had an ancestor on Washington's general staff. I think his duties included wiping the General's bottom, except at Valley Forge, where they ran out of toilet paper. They'll find out about him and bingo—you're in, girl. Brad will be very proud of you. And then, there will be plenty of gay old times at the club. They might even have an annual theatrical; you can star. But seriously, the worst of it will be trying to live with a nasty little

problem that everyone down there would much rather ignore than do anything about. And there are two things you can do about it: you can either get up on your hind legs and make noise—in which case you'll be asking for trouble—or you can ignore it too (if you can't lick 'em join 'em) and before you know what's happening you'll be converted. All the light-hearted nigras, singin' in the cotton fields, so happy they wouldn't change places with you for a year's residence in a decent white hotel. All that is just ess aitch eye tee."

"Okay, Daniel," I said, "okay, get off your soapbox. You know all this has nothing to do with me and Bradley."

"Oh yes, it does," he shouted. "It's a Way of Life and it's for the birds. You'll get so sick of it you'll start drinking too. That's why you dug Bradley's mother. And one last thing. Bradley. He'll be president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce before you can say Richard Milhous Nixon." Danny sat back on his hips and glowered at me.

"Danny, I told you, I won't talk about it if you're this way." I felt tears in the back of my throat. I started to gather up my coat which was lying beside me. "And god-dammit, I mean it."

"Why so riled up, honey chile?"

"I'm riled up, as you put it, because I think your attitude stinks. If you don't like Bradley you can keep it to yourself. *I'm* the one who's marrying him, not you."

"You are?"

"Yes, Danny dear, I am." I said this steady as a ship on a painted ocean. Then I did get up and without looking back I walked right out of the drugstore.

I walked and walked. Into sections of town I'd only ridden past. Where old doorways pitched woodenly and houses seemed on the verge of collapse. I walked by a place called Billy's Café that jingled like a bag of coins and a bowling alley howling and rumbling like a train in a subway. Under ordinary circumstances I would have been apprehensive but now I was so absorbed in my antagonism to Danny that I had no emotion left over for worry

though I was walking into the depths of the mysterious night.

I had never, in all my life, had a profound difference with Danny and I felt suddenly that a piece of me had been chipped off. It wasn't so much that he had discovered things at Yale which God knows even Daddy was unaware of—that was to be expected. It was that he was using his new "wisdom" as a weapon against me. Against my marrying Bradley. He couldn't bring himself to stab me directly; he was piercing and poking me all over, here and there, little by little so that I really suffered. If he had honestly liked Bradley he might merely have said (still legitimately despising the "way of life" as he put it): "Don't let it get you, kiddo," or something along that line. And I would have accepted his advice gratefully and Bradley and I would probably have left the South in the end; and it wouldn't have got us, no matter where we lived. Or then, maybe if Danny had said what he really believed, namely, "If you marry this jerk Bradley Evers you will be sorry for the rest of your life and so will I, so for Christ's sake don't do it" I might have collapsed with relief and so it would be. But he wouldn't come straight out with it. I don't know, maybe he wasn't trying to make me suffer, maybe he just wanted me to make the final move by myself.

XIV

MY FUTURE seemed to beckon with a skeleton's finger. I used, in this period, to wake up at night, like at three A.M., dripping with anxious perspiration out of a ghastly dream in which I was threatened or going under neck-snapping waves. Or else, when I couldn't fall into sleep, men I had known—Farley Button, Jimmy Paltz, even Beau Oltarsh—would come and visit me in bed and I would imagine, with horrid delight, that they kissed me and held me. They came back night after night.

And still, my family seemed oblivious to my misery. It's funny how you can live with people day after day and know that they see absolutely nothing beyond their own important faces in the mirror. Mothers say of sons who turn out to be child molesters or patricidal maniacs, "he was always a good boy." What were they doing all those years—mystical omphaloskepsis?

Mother was blooming. She was like a chrysanthemum plant that has sprouted an extra flower, dazzling and unexpected. If she'd wanted to she couldn't have been stopped. I watched her with increasing nausea.

The Evers were instructed to submit a list of guests to Mother's secretary (temporary, \$2.50 an hour) and after their two hundred were dispatched, came the charming week end when the Evers

and Bradley came to stay at our house, for a "get acquainted" visit and to pounce on the answers as they arrived. I was the reason everyone was so worked up and yet no one paid any attention to me—except Bradley. Breakfast was a real nightmare. Mother would drift down the stairs in what she called a duster but which was actually a full-length gown of billowing organdy over something heavy like satin. She looked like one of those toney magazine ads for bathroom tissue. She was as nervous as a fawn, I knew, although she tried to appear cool and detached. Everybody would sit down around the table (but lucky Danny who was away at Yale) and pretend not to be waiting for the mailman.

"More toast, Lulu?" Mother asked Mrs. Evers. (Mother had made Anna, the cook, slice the crusts from the toast so you had to eat two pieces for the feel of one.)

"Yes, my dear, thanks, I think I will. My, your Connecticut air makes me hungry. I just never eat anything at all for breakfast down home, do I, Henry?" Lubelle Evers' knowledge of what she had called "my secret" had apparently been planted and then withered in some alcohol-soaked patch of her memory because at our house she behaved as if this impending marriage were made in heaven. Furthermore she was putting on as much of a "Southern" act as her chahmin' husband. I was disgusted. I was bereft.

"And how are you two girls going to spend our hard-earned money today?" Daddy put this question to Lubelle Evers, smiling as if he thought this was the greatest joke. I stuck my nose into my cup and swallowed. Needless to say, I was off my feed and everyone was starting to notice how thin I was; I had taken to wearing heavy woolen skirts and sweaters, even though it was turning warm, to help pad me but that didn't work on my cheeks and my wrists.

Ha, ha, ha; the assembled thought Daddy's remark highly original and even amusing. More talk about how they were going to buy out Welthy's department store and then get to work at the jeweler's.

And so on until the clang of the letter slot silenced them like an air-raid siren.

"Please, folks, stay seated, I'll get the mail," Daddy said as he wiped his lips carefully and pushed his chair away from the table.

Then Mother went to her desk and came back with the invitation list—all six pages of it—and after Daddy brought in the stack of answers she would read each one out loud. They were not all formal responses, à la Emily Post. Some of them rambled on for page after page of accreted trivia and news; the gossip of years piled onto small blue squares of paper and sent off with inappropriate exhilaration.

"Oh, Serena and Herbert," Lubelle cried. "Imagine, Henry, Serena and Herbert, coming all the way from Pasadena for Bradley's wedding. Isn't that just lovely?"

"Lovely," Mr. Evers said.

"And here's one from someone who signs herself Aunt Cecilia," Mother said, peering at the signature. "That must be from your side of the family, Bradley."

"Yes," Bradley admitted, "that's really Daddy's aunt. My great aunt."

I saved this one. I thought that if I ever grew humble enough I would put it in an envelope and send it to Danny with a message like: you are awarded the gold medal for a great save. Here's a relic of the struggle—or something like that. This is some of the letter, so help me:

DEAR MRS. HAPGOOD,

My heart is "good" and "happy" as I write you this letter of, alas, refusal.

Then stuff about how she always felt a "special, shining love" for baby Bradley.

I met your lovely daughter when she visited in our city and I said to myself that Antoinette would make the perfect wife for Bradley, my dearest nephew. How beautifully she seems to understand our ways, how sweetly she will bend to our customs.

The fact was I really *had* met Aunt Cecilia. Bradley and I had paid her a fifteen-minute duty call on instructions from

Lubelle. Auntie was a dried-up, prune-faced spinster with three servants and suspicious eyes, who wet down Bradley's cheeks with kisses and gave me a scowl and a "how-de-do?"—period. Aunt Cecilia's letter closed with a long complaint about her arthritis, which would (mercifully) keep her from the wedding, accompanied by a description of her daily routine and ending with a blood-chilling curse on all doctors.

"She must be a lovely old lady," Mother said as she drew a line through Aunt Cecilia's name.

And here are parts of another letter of regret. This one was from a woman named Frances Harremore. The stationery had been provided by the Hotel Excelsior in Rome. Mrs. Harremore had plans for me:

We want to welcome your daughter, whom we have not met but whom we are certain is a charming girl (or else would Bradley have chosen her?) to Atlanta. Knowing Bradley, I am sure we are extremely fortunate to have her as our "neighbor." We dearly love our beautiful city and I know Antoinette will not feel a stranger there for a single day—there are so many delightful people for her to meet and so many worthy community activities for her to take part in—the Garden Club, the Civic Orchestra, the Veterans' Hospital Nurses Aide Corps (my pet), the negro schools—and many many others.

I must stop before I make myself homesick.

Then more gushing about how sorry she was to miss the "nuptials" and the promise of a gift from Florence. (It turned out to be a tooled leather cigarette box; I got six of them. I also got four salt-and-pepper sets, three chafing dishes, and two heart-shaped silver picture frames.)

My mother adored reading the letters aloud; she was disappointed when the answers were merely formal.

The dregs of my freedom were being gulped by time. Only one more important episode, in fact, the episode which precipitated my

debacle, needs to be told: our encounter with Dr. Rombley, the minister.

Daddy insisted we go. Even Bradley wasn't especially delighted at the prospect. I mean I think he felt he was already spiritually cocked to be shot into marriage and anyone telling him anything would be wasting his time. But Bradley's a very obliging fellow and to tell you the truth we agreed to go for Daddy's sake and the older generation in general. I think they are comforted in believing that we have piety and faith, even though they may never see any concrete evidence of it.

The Hapgoods have always gone to Dr. Rombley's church. It hasn't always been this Dr. Rombley's; before that it was his uncle's—another Dr. Rombley, a *really* smart and inspired Dr. Rombley. When I say we went there I mean just regularly enough to be considered members of the congregation but no more. Edmund Rombley likes to think of himself as a literal instrument of God; his voice fills his Episcopal edifice like an organ—one with all the stops. Whenever the highest-ups in the organization need a man to make a statement on TV or over the radio they always choose Dr. R. because he sounds so good. But he's vain about his voice the way some men are proud of their golf swing or their full head of hair or sharpness in business. Well, what's the sense of going on about Dr. Rombley? The point I'm trying to make is if a man purports to be a Man of God and he has publicly contracted to look after the spiritual health of his flock and he has accepted the responsibilities of a community leader as well, then how can he bear to face himself if what he spends most of his time cultivating is his lousy voice? Can you see why most of the people my age can't take religion seriously? I mean, we might have our own but we prefer to keep it to ourselves.

Daddy made the appointment for us. It was set for about three weeks before the wedding date of May 31. I'm still not absolutely sure what was to have been accomplished by our talk with Dr. Rombley. A fusion of spiritual and sexual enlightenment, I suppose. The sum total of all one's experience wrapped up in a half-

hour package and neatly tied with the ribbon of society's sanction.

I'm quite sure, looking back on the feigned ease of the three parties involved, that these little premarital chats were as distasteful to Dr. Edmund Rombley as they were absurd to his young parishioners. But they had to be endured; they were part of the ritual of modern marriage.

That day was a sparkling Saturday morning in spring. Bradley had arrived by plane the evening before and we all had stayed up very late, going over minutiae of plans for the ceremony and reception with Mother and Daddy, who insisted that we "approve" every single detail including the number of matchbooks stamped with gold A. H. and B. E. At this point I was so deadened by uncertainty that almost anything was all right because nothing was all right. I think I was in the emotional equivalent of physical shock: all my sensations were turned way down very low and I just sat there, not listening to the noises around me, numb and sweating.

And still I continued to go through the motions.

Dr. Rombley's church and rectory were only a few blocks from our house. Bradley and I walked there from our house. It was warm and sunny. The trees, soft and palely green, fluttered faintly like tiny chicks just out of the shell and startled by life. I remember how absolutely chaste our street seemed—so well-tended you might have thought a prince lived in each house. Each lawn had a pelt of thick soft grass—green ermine. I wonder now I was aware of anything but myself, but this morning something odd was happening: the less I felt inside, the sharper my eyes and ears became. I saw what was all around me as if someone had whispered, You'd better take a good look, you may not see this again. You know, doomed.

Bradley had my hand. He said, "Now after we get this charming visit over with, I'll take you anywhere you'd like to go. How about New York? We'll go to the city, have lunch somewhere nice, and then maybe take in a show." He was really very sweet.

"Is there time?"

"All right then, we'll skip lunch. Or if you want."

"Whichever," I said, tonelessly.

"This is it, isn't it?" he asked. We'd st church, a simple white building with a prist

"Yup," I said. "Come on. Let's just let St. ing. He's so good at it."

"Anything you say, honey," Bradley said, l about to enter fall training. "Let's get it over wit

Mrs. Rombley, large, curly, in the middle of her thirties—years she was clearly not exploiting—led us primly into her husband's study and told us to make ourselves comfortable, "Dr. Rombley will be with you in a moment." She acted about fifty years old, that grave. She left and noises of children upstairs were loudly shushed.

"Sit down, Nicky, why don't you?" Bradley said.

I tried to do something with my hands but they wanted a cigarette and I wasn't sure I ought to be smoking when Dr. Rombley came in. Still the good little girl.

Doors opened and closed, feet passed mutely over heavy carpets. Dr. Rombley appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning, Antoinette. And Mr. Evers, is it?" Bradley shot out of his chair and he and the minister clasped right hands as fervidly as conspirators planning an assassination. Well-bred Nicky stood up and dipped her head.

"Sit down, Antoinette, sit down," Dr. Rombley told me, flashing a smile and hurrying around his desk where he sat down, safe. Everyone telling me to sit down.

"Take that chair, young man. I believe you'll find it quite comfortable. It used to belong to my uncle Peter Rombley and I begged him to leave it to me because he would compose his brilliant sermons whilst sitting in it." Dr. Rombley looked at me to see if I dug his suggested (but mild) blasphemy. "But I soon discovered that inspiration is not merely a matter of magic." Ah, I thought, he's cleared himself with The Man Upstairs.

divorce courts."
Bradley ex-
"Well, beauty to

hour packaged himself back into the lumpy velvet wing chair.

I'm q'iso you two are going to be joined in matrimony. A partiatul bond."

"Yes sir," I said and smiled towards my fiancé. What else could I do?

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Evers. You must surely realize what a lucky young man you are." He too had assumed the protective coloration of middle-age; he wasn't, after all, even a generation older than Bradley.

Bradley beamed and said, "Yes, sir, Dr. Rombley. Nicky is, if you will forgive my slang, the most."

"Oh, yes indeed she is," the minister said. Oh God, I thought, how much longer?

"Well, and where did you go to college, what are your enthusiasms? Let's get the "feel" of you, as it were. You don't object?"

"Oh no, sir." I really think Bradley meant it too.

"Well, I've just recently graduated from Georgia Tech. I work for my father in Atlanta. He's got a construction firm there." I will say this for Bradley: he was being economical.

"Build me more stately mansions, Oh, my soul." Dr. Rombley jumped at the opportunity with resonant gusto.

But this didn't throw Bradley. "Nicky and I are planning to rent a small apartment in Atlanta and then . . . well, we haven't quite decided where we'll live after that." Bradley looked at me for affirmation and encouragement. I wasn't much help.

"Take your time," Dr. Rombley said, nodding. "No sense in trying to arrange your lives on a five-year plan. Take your time and see where your lives are leading you." I thought this a rather radical stance for the minister to take but naturally I said nothing.

"And you like the same sort of things Nicky does?" The questions were still going Bradley's way, thank God. "That's quite essential, you know; you'll be together for a long long time. Too many couples go into marriage first and *then* discover one has always hated the other's hobby and vice versa. Makes for a rather

unpleasant atmosphere and usually ends in the divorce courts."

"Oh yes, sir, we like the same things."

There was a pause. I thought Dr. Rombley wanted Bradley to start making a list.

"We both like the theater," I offered.

"Yes, and we both play tennis."

"Excellent," Edmund Rombley said. "Exercise for both the mind and the body." I wondered when he'd last seen a play.

And we both like sex, I added silently, but not with each other. And my interior tears started to flow.

Dr. Rombley cleared his golden throat. "You both find one another ah . . . attractive, do you? You realize, of course, that in addition to mutual respect and mutual interests and mutual love of God, a marriage must embody the ultimate in closeness. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that it is absolutely essential for a man and woman, married, to express their recognition of the gift of love, through a perfect marriage of their bodies. The partners in a marriage are beholden to God for creating them and creating *in* them the ability to articulate not only their spiritual gratitude but their physical and emotional thanks as well. And there is nothing, you will discover, as truly and profoundly rewarding on this earth as the progeny of a happy union. Children, Antoinette and Bradley, are the greatest of God's gifts to us." Dr. Rombley stared at me and then at Bradley.

Bradley and I sat, for different reasons, dumb.

Dr. Rombley spread his arms out on his desk, his palms flat on the lustrous mahogany in a sort of benediction.

"Now don't look so frightened, Bradley," Dr. Rombley said. "There's plenty of time left before you're helping Antoinette measure out formula."

Bradley smiled with pleased embarrassment. I smiled idiotically, unhappily.

"Well I must say," our instructor purred on, "that this is an extremely pleasant duty I have performed today. You two have the look of a man and woman who know exactly what they're

about. I only wish all the young couples who came here to have a chat with me were as obviously prepared for this serious step as you two. Now go off with you, it's too nice a spring day to be stuck in a musty old study."

Edmund Rombley rose. Bradley rose. I made it shakily to my feet. Bradley thanked him profusely. I smiled and smiled—or I would have thrown up.

"I was wondering what gift we should get for him," Bradley said as we walked back down the street. "He's quite a guy, isn't he, honey?" Incredibly, it seemed that Bradley had enjoyed himself in Dr. Rombley's musty old study.

While me, I thought that man is enough to make *anyone* live in sin rather than be married.

"I especially liked that part about our physical thanks," Bradley said, taking my hand. "I guess sex is pretty important after all. I mean, if everything else is okay first."

I believe our "little chat" with the minister was the squeeze of the trigger on the gun which propelled me as far away from Bradley as it was possible to go. Our talk with him was on that warm and waking Saturday morning; the next day we all went to hear the minister preach his sermon and to absorb some piety. Dr. Rombley's topic was Forgiveness. I remember that at first I did not listen but watched instead the motes of dust falling through the warm Christian air in the pretty sedate church, the seat of the city's upper-crust conscience; some of the specks landed as silently as snow on the trembling blue cornflowers of the spring bonnet in front of me and then disappeared. *How many specks are there? As many as stars? As grains of sand? As dead people under the ground? Who was it who said our world is just one big graveyard?*

Bradley's listening. I can tell without turning my head. His cheeks are still, his fingers are still. Who does he think he has to forgive? Nobody yet.

"You all know how hardened your hearts are against those whom you consider to be your enemy."

Your enemy? Yourself. Simple. Your pretty head, smiling, performing. I wish I were ugly. I wish people didn't look at me, com-

ing and going. Undressing me and trying to imagine through my clothes what it's like. But maybe I wouldn't like to be ugly either. My nose is all right, my nose may get me a part in a play. Wanted: ingénue with okay nose. I hate my nose.

His voice is good. It's so good I don't even have to listen to what he's saying. Like opera in German or Italian—you can't care what they're saying because it's so beautiful. And sad. Madame Butterfly, Aida, that girl in the tomb. Dr. Rombley must know all about rhetorical periods, he goes up and down, up and down like waves just before they reach the shore. Some of the words are jumping through: white caps.

"Hate immobilizes, like a rock on your chest."

What a silly image. But it's true. When I can't get up in the morning, there's a slab of stone on my chest, like a Salem Witch. Hate? I wish I knew. I thought it was despair.

Does he really think he's going to change anybody?

It's funny but I feel safe here. Sanctuary. Church is where you go to be condemned but also to be saved. No one can touch me here. The smells are nice: rotting bindings, leather cushions, polish, perfumes, Mother's perfume. It would be even better at night. I'd like to be here alone.

I'm in a flooding river and things are bumping me along to a place where I cannot swim. What's there? Maybe a waterfall. Rocks to smash my brains like scrambled eggs. A whirlpool to swallow me. A sigh, a gurgle and there's the end. Is there no other way? Oh God, forgive me!

"What will you gain in pardoning just one man? An infinite happiness, the love of God."

Dr. Rombley lowered his eyes at last, his record over. I lowered mine. I was bursting inside. For as Dr. Rombley talked something had happened to me. I had hardly listened but John Wesley himself could not have had a more startling effect. You see, during the final moments of the sermon, I decided that since thought had betrayed me, the only thing left was

ACTION!

XV

THAT EVENING Bradley and I parted for the last time. It was an upsetting leave-taking in all ways. For one thing, I had definitely decided to escape. And for another, Bradley's plans had been thrown into confusion by the weather: rain, torrents and rivers of rain, came down all day and the planes weren't flying.

"The weather bureau says it's going to clear by early evening," Daddy said, hanging up the phone.

I took another look outside and doubted it.

Then, five minutes before the time we were to leave for Bradley Field (honest-to-God, that's the name of Hartford's airport), the airline called him and said Bradley's flight was canceled indefinitely and would he like to make a reservation on a plane leaving the next morning. Daddy and Mummy were all for Bradley's spending another chummy night at our house.

"I told Dad I'd be at work Monday A.M., and I want to keep my word," Bradley said. "No, I'll have to take the train, darn it."

"You won't make it, son. You'd be better off taking the morning flight instead," Daddy said.

"Well, I'll be there by noon on the train and at least Dad will know I did my darndest to get back on time. Suppose the planes aren't flying tomorrow?"

It was obvious Mummy and Daddy thought Bradley's gesture was pretty silly but he was determined. I felt exultant, of course, almost as if I'd willed him into his decision. It was a very Bradley-like choice—even I thought so—but still, I was sure I had something to do with it: I was wishing so hard that he would go away so that I could get free.

Bradley said elaborate good-bys to my parents and Danny, who managed to be just polite, and we got into the car and drove to the station.

We were early; about thirty-five minutes. Bradley suggested we get something to eat so we went into the coffee shop and Bradley ordered frankfurters and beans with brown bread and milk.

"You sure you don't want anything, honey? You hardly ate any lunch." Bradley gulped down half his milk and scraped around the inside of his little bean pot. He'd already asked me this twice.

"No thanks, really, Bunny, I'm not very hungry today."

"Seems to me you don't eat enough to keep a bird alive," Bradley said, disapproving.

The fact was there was no room left for food in my stomach; it was filled with butterflies. My scalp tingled, my hands trembled, and I was more excited than I had been at any time since my wicked night with Farley Button; at last things were happening to me.

Bradley, poor thing, thought I had lost my appetite because he was leaving.

"Honey darling," he said, squeezing my hand, "in another three weeks I won't ever have to leave you again." There was a bubble in his throat. I wanted to ask him to clear it but I controlled myself with great effort and his voice bubbled on. And on—about the wedding and the honeymoon (Bermuda, the best hotel). I stuck a smile on my face and didn't listen; I had my own thoughts and, tumbled though they were, they could have been boiled down to this:

Bradley Evers, you are in for a shock. I am sorry, Bradley Evers, but for once I COME FIRST. This may be an end but it is also

a beginning—a beginning for me; I don't really know what I'm beginning but I know I have to end this or I'll never be able to breathe again.

People stared at us as Bradley kissed me good-by. One woman in an unbecoming green felt hat muttered about us to her companion, a soul-mate in a brown felt hat, something unpleasant, intended to embarrass or humiliate us. She made me angry with despair.

Why are none of us satisfied? Why must we go around trying to *change* each other? I mean it's all right to feed the starving, build for the homeless, heal the sick, but where do we find the right to tell people how to act? what to think? whom to embrace as a friend? Why couldn't that woman in the green hat just be grateful that anyone *wants* to kiss someone else? She made me, for a moment, absolutely hopeless.

I remember walking back from the platform into the station feeling empty and liberated at the same time. The echoing waiting room was grimy and smelly. Having been made almost obsolete, it had just given in to filth.

Almost unconsciously, certainly without giving my act a second thought, I slipped my engagement ring from my finger and dropped it into my purse. And then I was aware of the odor of hot dogs cooking and I realized I was famished. I'd never eaten a hot dog standing up except at a football game and the idea of having one there was intensely desirable, almost overwhelming. I bought one.

"Mustard?"

"Sure," I said. Usually I don't take mustard.

"Cream and sugar with the coffee, miss?"

"Please."

"That's a pretty nice string of beads you got there." The boy behind the counter was smiling at me.

"Thank you." My fingers played with my pearls. I turned away so the boy wouldn't think I was encouraging him but not all the way around so he wouldn't think I was brushing him off either. The hot dog tasted delicious.

In spite of the deterioration all around me, it was nice standing there, with the evening still light and a few people moving about indifferently, giving me plenty of room. It was warm enough for a light sweater, not too warm but just exactly right though it was still raining. I did not know what I was going to do or where I was going to go but I did know that it was not straight home. Maybe I'd drive around for a while or go to a movie where I could think. I had no plans neatly laid out. I was frankly muddled, but somehow I felt there was no desperate hurry now.

"Hi."

"Hello," I said. A man about thirty-five in a brown tweedy jacket and a nimbus of charm was standing beside me. Quite close but not smothering me.

"Hot dog good? I'm thinking of investing in one myself."

I nodded, embarrassed a little. Because I liked him. I liked a stranger.

He ordered one and stood beside me chewing it up and looking at the people with me. A bunch of little kids were chasing each other with squeals of pleasure around a wooden bench. No one stopped them.

"Are you waiting for someone?" this man asked me. I couldn't tell whether he was just making conversation or really wanted to know.

"The opposite," I said. "I just saw someone off."

"Husband?"

I shook my head. "A friend. You?"

"Oh, I just got in," he said. "God I hate trains. Prefer to fly. Matter of fact, I work out at Bradley. In an office. I guess I'm like a kid, I just gotta be around planes. I always wanted to fly myself, but I couldn't get a license so I took the next best thing to it. Which is to say the job isn't so hot and the pay is lousy but I get a free ticket to anywhere once a year, off season, of course. I'm off to Hawaii next month for a long swim and some fun in the sun."

"Why couldn't you be a pilot?" I was much more direct than

I am with people I know well, but it never occurred to me to ask him where he had got *on* the train.

"Not smart enough or something like that." He smiled at me, telling me nothing. I didn't believe him.

"How would you like me to take you backstage?" he asked. "That is, if you have nothing better to do. I have to go out there and pick something up anyway and I'll show you why more planes don't crash. Crashes, by the way, are very bad for business."

"I guess I should tell you that I'm scared silly on planes and I just hate flying. I'd rather be on a train for three days than on a plane three hours."

"That's perfectly okay with me," he said. "You don't have to like flying for my sake. Look, you're afraid of a tiger too but you'll go to the zoo to see one, won't you?"

"All right," I said, "you win." Actually, what ought to have occurred to me—the fact that I was being picked up—just didn't. There didn't seem anything wrong with this proposed tour of the airport and Howard Cramer (he introduced himself at that point) was very casual about the whole thing.

So I let myself be talked into going with him. The streets looked like waxed leather streaked with silver and the rain continued. Howard Cramer, beside me in the front seat of my car, talking about how flying was so great and about jets, which were going to take over the world. I remember thinking that he must have some bug about planes, he just wouldn't stop talking about them. Actually, it turned out I was wrong about Howard Cramer: flying wasn't his only passion. But I liked him immensely. I mean he seemed spontaneous and relaxed, not in the least pretentious. And then I became aware of the paradox that, although I was in a car with someone I had never seen before in my life, about whom I knew no more than the man in the moon, I was looking at him straight and smiling at him. Instead of disturbing me, the paradox had me absolutely delighted.

He took me all over the airport, talking a blue streak, but interesting. He made the planes seem much less menacing. We walked into a hangar where several mechanics were playing cards

on a crate and one of them said, as he saw Howard, "Hiya, Howie, How's the boy? How about sitting in for a quick hand?"

Howard said, "Sorry, fellas. Can't you see I'm occupied?"

They laughed and one of them whistled and Howard quickly steered me out. "Jokers!" he said.

The rain calmed, then stopped altogether. Planes immediately came to life. It was just like Bradley not to have gambled while the weather turned around.

Something in me had changed and I felt not at all like the Nicky Hapgood I'd always been, the good girl. I was another Nicky; horrid. And if I was different, then couldn't I do what my old self might not have done, what she might have been afraid of? The logic was absolute and the change complete. For example, even the huge jets taking off failed to frighten me. Their tremendous whining ascents were, to me, the noises of hope. I wanted to be aboard, I wanted to skim over the earth as fast as light.

"Howard, this is fun." We were climbing a flight of steps up to the control tower.

"I told you so," he said and took my arm, which I did not pull away. "We're not supposed to be in here but I'll open the door a crack and you can take a quick peek."

Howard pulled open the door and I looked. Nothing spectacular: some electric apparatus, coffee cartons spilling over wastebaskets, a few men moving around very calmly. One of them, who seemed awfully young, was talking to a pilot above, directing him down onto the field. I thought the pilot ought to have twenty-twenty hearing or he shouldn't be where he is. Now if a crazy man suddenly grabbed the microphone and started giving wrong directions, he'd kill a lot of people. You are cleared to land, your position is such-and-such, the wind is from the west at ten miles an hour. Boom. Right down on top of a house. I don't know why I had such morbid fantasies because, as I'd told Howard, I was really enjoying myself and I liked the room in the sky and the out-of-tape feeling (it was like backstage). A man sitting at a ticker-tape machine in the corner finally turned around and gave us one long hard stare. Then he sort of shrugged and turned back

to his work. Howard whispered a few more explanations and then we turned and walked down back to the ground.

You see, when forbidden rooms are suddenly opened to you you are neither struck dumb nor do you find there the spectacular magic you suspected: you might merely find men going about their business. You know how long that took to sink in? Well, I'll tell you: I'm still not altogether convinced. I mean sometimes when I'm waiting patiently for sleep I have these night daydreams and prominent in them is always something that does not and could not possibly exist.

When Howard Cramer had taken me all over, into offices and out on the runways and into the employees' lounge, we sat down and he turned to me and asked, "Well, and where to now?" as if it were really up to me.

At this point the other Nicky Hapgood would have said, "Thank you very much for the interesting tour, I'm going home now." But this new person hesitated and looked away, willing that her mind be made up by someone else. (Both Nicky Hapgoods, apparently, are cowards in their own way.)

"I know," Howard Cramer said. "Do you like to dance?"

I nodded, without looking at him.

"There's a place near here, a nice place where the jukebox has only good records, stuff from the 'forties.' I guess maybe you're too young to remember them but Jesus, they were the greatest thing to dance to ever cut. Like Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, the old Shaw stuff. Boy, you could listen to them all night without even moving and feel like you were dancing anyway. Can you come with me, would you like to come for just a little while?"

"I guess I could," I said. I still hadn't the brains to think of this as a pick-up. It was so drawn out and natural. And even if it hadn't been, I would have gone with him.

"Do you want to call anyone, your folks?"

"No," I said, "they won't worry." Now I understand: he was smart; he was enhancing his integrity by seeming concerned.

And to repeat: I would have gone with him whatever the circumstances, whatever his attitude.

We got into my car and he directed me to a part of town I didn't recognize, not far from the airport. We parked and went into a pizza place with music. He was right, it was a nice place, not a joint with J.D.'s looking at you like they were waiting for you to turn your back so they could do something awful. And the waiters wore long white aprons—you can always tell from the waiters what kind of place you're in—and left us alone. The music was absolutely terrific. I honestly don't know much about it but it somehow sounded "right," I mean not trying for anything but just sliding along, like a sharp new pair of skates.

We danced. Nicky Hapgood let a stranger put his arms around her and breathe in her face and touch her back where it tingles and get the feel of her hair and guess what she was thinking.

And while we were dancing I discovered something about Howard Cramer: he was not simply good-looking, he was the kind of handsome that makes women feel soft in their knee joints. He was the kind of handsome that has something feminine in it so that if you were not restricted by conventional phrases you would call it beautiful. For instance, he had enormous circular black eyes like suns in total eclipse around which radiated black lashes. And full lips, on a woman pouty, but on him just very sexy. And a long, wide jaw, strong and solid. But altogether a beauty more Etruscan than Roman, anything but refined. His hair was quite thick and smelled clean.

"What's that?" I said.

"That's 'You Take the A-Train'."

"What's an A-Train?"

"It's a subway, in the city, it goes from downtown all the way up to Harlem. Harlem, where the great washed used to go for kicks. Nowadays there's too many Puerto Ricans up there and no more Savoy so no one goes any more."

"A train immortalized like a streetcar?"

"What?"

"There's a famous trolley in New Orleans . . . oh, never mind," I said. "I don't really know what I'm mumbling about."

"But all the same you're one cute doll." He pushed me away and looked me up and down and up. "I suppose you already know that."

I said, with too much archness, "I imagine I'll do in a pinch." And he didn't even pinch me.

We danced for a long time, to a lot of records that sang at us, instead of shrieking or wailing. When we were not dancing we sat opposite one another in a booth and drank beer and smoked and talked. We talked mostly about people, it wasn't the most intellectual conversation in the world. You know, the kind of people and things we liked or responded to, the ones we could easily do without. I told him about Mr. Evers (without going into the relationship of course) and he told me his theories about the great washed, the rich people who did what everybody else did.

I never knew until that night what losing track of time meant; always before I thought it was an exaggeration, but suddenly I looked around me and saw only one other couple at a table, and one waiter patiently drying glasses behind the bar and heard only the quietness and I asked Howard what time it was.

Without looking at his watch, he told me it was twenty of two.

"Twenty of two! My God, my parents will be having a fit."

Howard looked at me with a small smile and said, "You're a big girl, aren't you? Haven't you ever spent the night out?"

"No."

Howard smiled again. "There's a first time for everything."

"I don't want to call home," I said. It was only because I was another Nicky Hapgood that I could do this; this was past rashness or nerve—another realm of behavior entirely.

Howard Cramer said nothing for a moment. Then he paid the waiter who appeared without being summoned, showed me where the ladies' room was and, after I was finished, steered me into my car and took over at the wheel. As if he had a plan for every move.

XVI

HOWARD CRAMER DROVE terribly fast and just as sure: he didn't try to pass other cars if there was a chance he couldn't make it but when there was a clear stretch of road he really traveled. He was so good you felt he was some sort of driving machine or as if the car were part of his own mechanism. But he was relaxed all the same; he even laid his right arm across the top of my shoulders. And he had me, now, coming and going. As he touched me, even through my clothes, I shivered and trembled, I sparkled and sputtered and sizzled, I was absolutely electrified. I would have been stripped and shouted, "Take me!" then and there if we hadn't been moving at eighty miles an hour. Here beside me was my second Farley Button.

And yet. And yet there was something vaguely wrong about Howard Cramer (perhaps at this point the wrongness merely increased my desire), some quality which would have made the other Nicky Hapgood cautious. Maybe it was the way his hair snaked down the back of his neck, little waves over his collar—nothing so sinister as a ducktail, yet striking me as slightly and oddly vain in a man. It might not have been that. It might have been his breeziness, no, breathlessness, as he talked in rushes like a soft and inconsistent wind. Or it may have been his disguise, for

he dressed himself like a Harvard man though it was some Catholic-sounding college he'd gone to in Pennsylvania and was not eager to tell me about, not even when (or if) he'd graduated. I *liked* the way he dressed but still it was not the way his father or brother dressed—I knew that, I didn't have to meet them.

Well, ominous signs were there to be ignored: I wasn't going to marry him and the new Nicky Hapgood could take care of herself. She wasn't going to marry Mr. Cramer, she wasn't going to marry anyone! And like that Southern girl, the one with the three personalities, Eve Black, Eve White, and Jane, I was more and more captivated by the new and wicked Nicky, the one whom I had to admit was clearly running away from everyone she had known, every rule she had obeyed. From Bradley the Bunny Rabbit, from her worried mother and her doting father and even her adorable little brother whom she now despised because he could stand up to anything.

And I was determined to have fun on this journey.

"Where we going?" I asked, somewhere on the Merritt Parkway.

"New York, Nicky. I told you. Dancing, whatever you want."

"Whichever," I said. I noticed that we had both avoided mentioning the problem of where we would sleep. "You're the boss," I added, delighted that he was, smiling at him, willing to be led almost anywhere. Howard Cramer flashed me a smile and turned his eyes back to the road; he was too good a driver to stop concentrating for a minute. And he was happy too, humming something we'd heard earlier, as full of energy as I was sleepy.

If it had occurred to me that Mother and Daddy might be alarmed I didn't dwell on it. It did not matter for this had to be all the way or not at all. I didn't want to get involved in long, fraudulent explanations on the telephone, long distance, yes, I'd decided to go to New York to visit Ellen So-and-So, you remember from Red Ridge, yes I'll be home tonight of course I'll give Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So your best and a little wooden box of lemon soaps, etc., etc., the number is REgent so-and-so and then call my friend Ellen and tell her that if my father or mother called yes I

was there but can she call you back and then having to check back and my God, you can see what I mean. It was better to do nothing at all.

Let them worry for once. Never, in my whole life, had I felt so completely liberated, so drunkenly at large. As a matter of fact, I felt large, that is, physically able to cope with anything, to play Shakespeare's Cleopatra, sing Brunhilde, or swim the Hellespont.

Howard and I stopped at a dark little bar somewhere in the East Fifties; I think it was what is known as an after-hours club. It must have been very late because although I was extremely tired I began to feel lightheaded, partially from fatigue and the rest from alcohol, more than I was used to—not to blot anything out but to welcome more in. And because I felt wicked the floodgates I'd held shut for most of my life gave way and in rushed a river of imagined profligacy. Tired, giddy, and agitated, I was still extremely pleased with myself.

Howard was masterful with me: he knew exactly when to keep his distance—and how far—and when to move in. He was thoughtful but not sentimental. If he believed I was easy to look at he came right out and said it: it was a fact, not a three-act play the way it was with Bradley. Every once in a while I'd think of Bradley with horror.

"I think I'd like to go to sleep now," I said, leaning against Howard in the booth. He was soft and solid. I loved him.

"Okay," he said, "let's go find us a pad. If I'm not mistaken there's a vacant one just a couple of blocks from here. Now you just sit still a minute while I go check. Don't go to sleep, now."

Howard shut himself in the phone booth. I could see that he wasn't talking but just listening. I felt vaguely nauseated. Through the glass Howard seemed somehow even more handsome, as if the glass were a seductive veil between him and me. My stomach rose up for one ghastly moment and then subsided for the night. Howard came back and led me, unprotesting, away.

Maybe you won't believe this but honest to God the next thing I remember was waking up the next morning. I was lying

on my stomach in a freshly made bed wearing the top of a pair of blue and white striped pajamas. I think I was hung-over but also terribly excited. Fear or shame never, frankly, entered my head.

"Howard?"

"Mmm?" Throat-clearing and other respiratory noises.

"Where are we?"

"Friend's apartment. Go back to sleep, it's only ten-thirty."

"What about your job?"

"Day off," he mumbled. "Go back to sleep."

"Howard? Did we?"

"How could we, you were out cold. Now please, for Christ's sake, let me sleep."

I didn't want to sleep any more. So I got out of bed and went to the bathroom and found my clothes thrown on a chair and put them on and wandered around, trying to figure out whose apartment we were in. It was a railroad flat, not a tenement but all the same not the sort of place I was used to. I'm sure the other Nicky would have been terrified by all this strangeness at once but the new me was as curious as a child. I looked out of the living-room window down into the street. It was an ordinary New York street: one large apartment house directly opposite and the rest nondescript, slightly sagging brownstones. I watched an indolent pregnant girl pushing a young child in a stroller down the sidewalk. Her face seemed to see nothing ahead of her, hear nothing, think nothing. Her belly swung from side to side at each step, the baby inside a moving balance. She was pale and uninteresting, neither shining nor suffering, her features merely pasted on. Her two children, what had they done to her? Or was she that way before? I wondered about the little boy in the stroller: was he ever teased or tickled or was he just tucked in bed at night like a potato in a storage bin?

Own strangeness bothered me not at all. If I'd had plastic
ne on my face and changed the color of my hair, I still
e felt more unlike the girl I'd grown up inside for

twenty years. This other Nicky was really taking over and her reactions were entirely new to me. Yet it wasn't so much a transformation as a loss of something unbearably cumbersome, like the thin man inside every fat man, just crying to get out: well, I'd gotten out.

In the kitchen, a tiny, windowless room opposite the front door, I found a loaf of stale (but not moldy) bread and a half jar of instant coffee and I began to make breakfast out of them. I was impatient for Howard to get up. I wanted to talk to him, I wanted him to make good use of my time there. It was quite a while before he did. While I waited I read an old copy of *Mad* magazine in the living room and every few minutes tiptoed back to see if Howard was awake. He slept like a bear in winter and didn't even stir when I started to bang things around to try to rouse him and finally, frustrated by my failure, began to eat without him. I heard the toilet flush just as I swallowed my toast and with the sound came a sudden flash of fear that disappeared immediately, like the bubbles in my cup of coffee.

"Good morning, or is it afternoon?" Howard sort of stumbled into the room and collapsed in an armchair doing a fair imitation of the classic hang-over victim. He was as matter-of-fact about my presence as a husband of long-standing might have been. And that was part of the curiosity for here I was, a strange girl bedded down with him in someone else's apartment, practically kidnapped (actually, I think I was young enough to be very serious, legally), and he was blasé or else he was terribly good at making a show out of an odd situation. At any rate I felt very queer and, although I tried to copy Howard and be as cool as he was, I just couldn't, I was too keyed up.

"I see you found some food all right," he said. "Pajamas fit?"

"You ought to know," I answered. "Whose apartment is this, anyway?"

"My sister's," Howard said, getting up and heading toward the kitchen. "She's away," he continued over his shoulder, pouring

some hot water into his cup. "Getting a divorce somewhere, I think."

"You think? Don't you know?"

"Sure I know. Getting a divorce. Come here, Nicky Hapgood." He gestured for me. Honest to God, he was easily the most fabulous-looking man I'd ever been close enough to touch. He was as persuasive as a hypnotist; I think I would have done anything, short of murder or suicide, that he asked me to.

We were back in the living room again. I floated over to his chair and sat in his lap and we kissed each other, with flourishes, for a long time. He'd brushed his teeth and forgotten his coffee so that remnants of peppermint clung to his tongue and got transferred onto mine and then disappeared. We were wildly suited, to put it mildly.

We spent most of that day in bed. Late in the afternoon, about four o'clock, Howard said he was hungry and would go out and buy us some cold cuts and beer. I was hungry too but I did not want him to leave, even for a few minutes because—and this sounds silly—I was terrified I would dissolve or something, I had this peculiar sensation of being unreal. But I had to let him go and while he was gone I kept myself busy by making the bed and calling home.

I guess I was still fairly lucid because I was able to recognize that by calling my parents I could stall them; if I hadn't they might have got panicky and called the police. Mummy answered the phone and before she could start in at her end, I gave her this long story about my friend Ellen from Red Ridge and I told it so neatly that she reminded me to be sure and go to Bonwit's and buy a box of lemon soaps for Ellen's mother. Then she asked me how long I was going to stay with Ellen and I told her that I'd call her again and let her know just when I was coming home. This seemed to satisfy her.

Greatly relieved, I took a shower; it was unexpectedly agreeable. I pretended that the water coming at me out of the head was warm rain and I was standing on a moss-covered rock by a water-

fall somewhere on a South Sea island waiting for my warrior lover to return with the day's bag of game. And soon my fear of melting away was replaced by the most passionate anticipation. Howard came back before I was dressed and he helped me finish. Then we ate wonderful, smelly sandwiches with lots of mustard and drank beer out of cans, and as we did the afternoon left us and in blew evening, soft and sweet. Nothing of the past or future came into my head to disturb me. I was enclosed in a speck of time in the middle of space and I was safe. It was the one moment of complete calm in those terrible three days of calamity.

I want to make sure it is perfectly clear that everything I did I did voluntarily, and that despite my awareness that each minute I stayed with Howard the consequences might be increasingly unwieldy, I was as happy then as I'll probably ever be.

What an awful thing: to know you have to betray every single one of your convictions in order to be happy!

As for Howard, I believe it was much simpler: he was enjoying himself vastly. Over and over again he told me how fine I was to make love to, what a beautiful body I had, how pleased he was to have me there with him.

Whenever Howard asked me questions about myself—like where did I live, what business was my father in, how many brothers and sisters did I have—I answered him vaguely but honestly. (Actually, he was very little interested in facts; it was attitudes he was after; he seemed tremendously involved with attitudes.) For instance I told him my family owned a house near Hartford but I didn't tell him exactly where or what kind of neighborhood it was in, and I told him my father was an insurance man but not that he was the president of one of the largest companies in America; and that I'd been to college and I described my day as Athena and he laughed over that and said something about even girls who go to college knowing a good time when they see it.

We joked about needing some fresh air and another form of

exercise. I thought it would be nice to walk around for a while. I also wanted to locate us in the city, however unfamiliar the neighborhood. And I wanted to buy some underwear so I wouldn't have to be bothered with washing what I had on. Eventually we did go out and walked a few blocks and then took a subway to Greenwich Village. Howard knew a coffee house and we went there and drank espresso and ate tiny wet cakes. The place was dark and full of kids in green and black looking very serious and hairy. Tucked into niches along the walls were anonymous busts in sepulchral marble staring at them. I felt much out of key—like a daisy in a patch of mushrooms but somehow I didn't really mind because I was so in love with Howard. I usually notice quite a lot of what is going on around me but then I was aware only of us.

Each time I try to remember what we talked about I go blank. I'm positive it wasn't anything like my conversations with Bradley, following a predictable line, an endless line of trivialities and endearments. In the first place, we were quiet a good part of the time and when we did speak it was in the nature of observation or revelation; and I was surprised how often we agreed. I mean I think we saw life from behind the same tree. Two Youths, watching their first battle.

We didn't stay too long in the coffee house; we were both anxious to go to bed again. I'm convinced that it isn't the people who are deprived sexually who are most impatient: it's the people who are having it in vast quantities that want more and more. We walked down Eighth Street, got back on the subway, ran up three flights of stairs, threw open the door, and hopped into bed. I never did get around to buying anything more than a toothbrush; I washed my underwear and stockings and hung them over the shower-curtain rod and as I did I suddenly saw myself as my mother might: wanton—but that didn't bother me in the slightest, in fact, it rather tickled me.

The next morning I woke up first again. I lay beside Howard in that strange bed and peered at his extraordinarily appealing

body. I watched the tiny hairs on his chest quivering each time he took a breath. What the hell was I doing there? By now I felt as attached to Howard Cramer as I had to a favorite bear I had loved as a child; I could not go to sleep if Bear were not in bed with me—as attached and as unattached, for the bear had never spoken to me, the bear had never acknowledged that he needed me too.

And what about Howard? What was *he* doing there? What about his job?

I slid carefully from under the covers and tiptoed around the apartment again, looking for clues to where I was, for somehow I was convinced this was *not* his sister's apartment and, although I did not really care whose it was, I was uncomfortable being lied to. I poked into the hall closet. Coats and bags of clothes were jammed so tightly inside that you couldn't have pulled out a coat without bringing everything else with it. Four small gray boxes were piled neatly on the shelf above the clothes and these interested me (I think evidence just *looks* like evidence). I realize it was wrong of me to snoop and I kept telling myself don't, it's none of your business, but something else kept telling me that it was terribly important to find out where I was. So I lifted one of the boxes down and went into the bathroom with it and sat down on the closed toilet and looked inside the box. It was crammed with photographs, thrown in together like dead leaves. And the pictures were very eloquent. What they said was: Howard is married to a pretty dark-haired girl and they've traveled a lot together in an old beat-up convertible and they honeymooned near a beach somewhere and they are not a bit shy about asking strangers to take their picture, body to body.

My reaction was not anger but bewilderment. I'd discovered enough so I put the box back and started making breakfast. Just like the morning before.

Soon Howard was up; he came into the kitchen and kissed my neck so divinely I thought my knees would buckle. He whispered "Good morning, little yellow bird. What shall we do today?"

"Hi," I said. "You want some marmalade with your toast? I found some marmalade."

"No, no marmalade. Just kisses." And he hugged me and kissed me and laughed when I frowned. He pulled me against him where he stood with his back to the sink.

"Well, I'd like some marmalade. Here, help me carry these things into the other room." I thrust the cups and saucers into his two hands and he went and put them on the coffee table in the front room.

He hadn't shaved yet; his bristles were reddish. I suddenly wondered whose razor he'd used yesterday.

"Come here, you luscious little piece of melon." Howard held his arms open for me; he liked to order me to do things, he was used to it. Obediently I sat on his lap and let him kiss me. But inside I was anxious: I was afraid of putting my foot in it but I *had* to ask him questions, I just couldn't let it go.

"Howard?"

"Yes, sugar?"

"Are you going to get fired for not showing up at work today?"

"Nope, baby doll, I'm not due back till tomorrow. Didn't I tell you? I have Mondays and Tuesdays off. I work week ends. And anyway, doll, it seems to me that's my worry, and if I wanted to lose my job I can't think of a nicer way to do it." Thereupon he kissed my breasts and smiled at me like a little boy, sort of sheepishly.

"Howard?"

"Now what?"

"Whose apartment is this really?"

"It's my sister's pad. I told you."

"Is that who you went on all those trips with?"

"What trips?" As he said this, all the muscles in his body tightened like a fishing line with a sudden bite; his chest and legs went hard.

"Well, okay," I stumbled on, "I found some pictures of you and a girl. You're married, aren't you?"

The odd thing about all this was that in my state it did not especially matter to me. It was much more curiosity than hurt that prompted me to start asking him these questions. But it was obvious that Howard felt I was attacking him, trying to crush him. His reaction was devastating.

"Stand up," he yelled at me, "get off me."

I slid off him as fast as I could. Howard shot from his chair and stood there with his legs apart, fumbling for a cigarette. The match scratched angrily. He took a drag, held it a moment and released the smoke with a grimace of anger. I saw a completely different Howard.

"What the hell business is it of yours if I am married? Or if I had ten wives? Yes, I'm married. This is my wife's apartment. She lives here, I live in Hartford because we're both so damn sure I'd kill her if we stayed in the same city—the one and only thing, by the way, we've agreed on in five years. Maria's not a monster, she just can't stand the fact that I've got balls and she hasn't. As a matter of fact, there's a little Maria in every woman—a little in you, now that I can see you real close up. What right do you have snooping around wherever it was you found those pictures?" He smashed his stub into an ashtray. It slipped off the table and threw stubs and ashes onto the carpet.

I couldn't say a word, I was so astonished. His anger, instead of subsiding, was building up into something uncontrollable. I began to be afraid. My silence seemed to enrage him.

"And what's this jazz about my being fired? Listen here, you little snoop, if I wanted to take two *months* off from the job, I'd do it. You hear? I'd do it and no woman's going to tell me, to start nagging me about getting back to work. Jesus God, you're all alike, lights on or lights off, a pack of identical bitches."

"Howard, listen, I don't really care. . . ."

"Don't care! That's a laugh. Listen, fellows, the little lady doesn't care. That's the best laugh I've had in three days. You're so innocent, aren't you. So innocent I'll bet you don't even know which end is up."

I realized Howard was screwy—I mean *really* screwy. It sobered me. "What am I supposed to say?" I asked, in a slightly steadier voice.

"God-damn it," he screamed. I knew I'd never seen anyone so horribly angry. "Say whatever you goddamplease." Then he began to talk low and breathlessly. "Let me set you straight, Miss Fancy-pants Athena. You think you're so pure and innocent. Well, you're one hundred and fifty per cent wrong. You're just another lousy pick-up, as soiled as anyone. Just what kind of a girl do you think hops into bed with the first man who comes along, the first man who speaks to her? What kind? Answer!"

"I can't," I shouted. Then I started to cry.

"Tears," he hissed. It sounded as if he despised me. He put on his jacket. "I'm going out before I do something terrible to you, before I slam you. And you better not be here when I get back." He opened the front door and walked out.

"Don't go," I cried, terrified of being left alone.

But a moment or so later, I was relieved. I was sure, then, that he really would have harmed me. Both he and I recognized that there was something missing in him and he was actually a very violent man.

But instead of dissolving my sense of isolation, Howard's attack hardened it. You see, even though I knew his accusations were wildly exaggerated, what I felt to be the basic truth of them—that in any personal situation I was bound to behave badly—struck home and tormented me horribly. I would never make it with anybody.

XVII

I LOOKED in my purse to count my money; it didn't amount to much, three or four dollars and some change. How stupid! I had my own account in a Hartford bank and could have drawn as much as I needed for a trip to Tokyo and back. But, not knowing what I was up to, I hadn't prepared myself and the money was as inaccessible as if it was in a bank in Japan instead of a few miles away. Just as I began to panic I saw a sparkle on the bottom of the bag; it was my engagement ring winking as brilliantly and propitiously as a monster diamond in a deep dark mine. I grabbed my coat and took one last, unhappy look around the apartment. Only my toothbrush remained; I left it on purpose, for anything associated with the place was going to disturb me. I ran down the stairs and, once on the sidewalk, ignored my car and hailed the first taxi I saw. I was terrified that Howard Cramer might be lurking somewhere, ready to pounce and do something awful.

As soon as I was in the cab I felt a little better. Howard was nowhere.

"Where to, girlie?"

"Well, I don't know exactly."

"Okay, girlie, it's your dough."

"Maybe you can help me," I said. "I'm looking for a place that will buy a piece of jewelry."

"Ya mean a wedding ring?" Chas. Zhugor turned around for the first time and gave me a nasty, knowing sort of leer. I felt a little sick.

"No," I said, as sharply as I could, "as a matter of fact not a wedding ring."

"Okay, girlie, no offense meant. You want to sell it or loan it? Loan it and you get it back, sell it and you don't. It's all according."

"Sell it, I guess." My tongue seemed to be way ahead of my mind in decisiveness.

"Just so happens," said Chas. Zhugor, "that I know of such a place. Third Avenue and Forty-fifth. Wanna go there? It's only a couple a blocks."

"Yes," I said, "that's very kind of you." I forced myself to be polite for my own sake.

"No trouble," he said. He seemed nice now, I don't know why.

"Ya know, it's funny," Mr. Zhugor went on, "a dame like you, looking for a pawnshop. You sure there ain't nothin' wrong? You sure you shouldn't be tellin' your folks, or your husband or somebody where you are? You look like you don't know yourself. You sure you're okay?" Still driving, he turned to examine me.

"Of course I'm sure," I said, as steadily as I could. My blood was turning frosty.

Mr. Zhugor continued the monologue. "Now you look to me—no offense meant—like a dame with money. I don't know why, it just sort of stands out. I been drivin' this hack seventeen years come August and, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that for rich people life is full of surprises—and not always good ones. Now you take me, my wife, my kids—we ain't got time for surprises. Just work. Here's a picture of the family. See what I mean?" He handed me a wallet. I looked at the faded picture of his faded family and did indeed see what he meant; they expected everything that happened to them, including disappointment, disaster,

and death. "Marlene, on the left, she's got a scholarship to Barnard College."

"That's very good," I said, knowing I couldn't have got one.

"Yup," Chas. Zhugor said. "Maybe after she's all educated she'll meet a rich guy who'll support me in my old age." He laughed at the idea. "Say," the driver said, "you sure you ain't running away from home or somethin'?"

"No," I said. "I mean certainly I'm sure. I just discovered I lost my wallet and I haven't enough money to get home to Connecticut. That's why I have to sell this . . . this pin." I pointed to my gold circlet and could see Mr. Zhugor squinting at it in his rear-view mirror.

"Okay, lady. You say you're okay, you're okay. It don't make no difference to me. Well, here we are. You just go in and tell 'em Uncle Charlie sent you. Ha ha."

"I'm sorry I don't have more than a dime to tip you. You can wait if you'd like and after I've got the money I can give you more."

"Naw, it don't pay me to wait. Hope you make out okay." And he sped off into traffic.

"Thanks," I said and really meant it. The cab driver was one of the few people I've ever talked to who didn't try to push me into something. Maybe he guessed I was running away and maybe not but he figured it was my business. Thank you, Chas. Zhugor.

The man in the store offered me two hundred and fifty dollars for the ring and ten for the pin. I took it without trying to get more. As a matter of fact I considered it rather generous. Once the ring was out of my possession I felt just great even though all that money seemed to weigh a ton in my purse. I was also sure everyone on the street had X-ray eyes and could see all those bills. I was carrying a great deal more than I could afford to lose.

You'll think this is crazy but the next place I went was La Guardia airport. I got there by taxi again but that driver was too busy trying to beat the other cars at the lights and changing lanes all over the place to talk to me. In the cab all I could think of

was how important it was for me to get far away from New York City and from Hartford and from Bradley in Georgia. I don't know why I chose an airport instead of a railroad station. Maybe I wished secretly that I'd be in a plane crash.

I bought a coach ticket for St. Louis. I chose St. Louis, I guess, because that was where Florence Goldwater came from. I didn't even know if she was there; it was merely that the map in my mind, studded with pinpoints, each representing a friend, lit up where St. Louis is. It really didn't make any difference, though, where I went.

From now on, events become slightly foggy, as if the weather changed over them, distorting whatever reality I had left. I remember I used the airport bathroom before the plane took off. I washed my face with cold water and liquid soap that stung my cheeks and smelled like disinfectant and dried it with a paper towel. I combed my hair and tried to ignore how grimy I felt; I guess I had perspired more than usual and I'd been wearing the same cotton dress for two days. I hated my body now. I looked in the mirror. An enormous gray half-moon cradled each eye and my cheeks seemed thinner—otherwise I was astonished to find myself essentially unchanged. I mean I didn't look like my idea of a woman gone to hell, a desperate runaway, or a whore. I was just Nicky Hapgood, tired and going nowhere.

Just before flight time I decided, for some misty reason, to call Mummy and Daddy again. Maybe I thought I could buy more time that way, like an appeal to postpone an execution. Maybe I just wanted to speak to the familiar. It was Mummy *again*, who answered the phone.

"Nicky, where *are* you? I called Ellen's house and they said you'd never been there. Nicky, I want you to come back right away." This in her Helen Pankhurst voice; it got my back up.

"Why did you call Ellen?" I asked. I was furious at her for checking up on me.

"Never mind that, Nicky. Your father's frantic. If you're not

home by tonight Daddy says he's going to have detectives start looking for you. You don't want him to do that, do you?"

"You can stop him, Mother," I said, in a voice as cold as death. "You *have* to stop him."

"Nicky," she was pleading now, "just tell me where you are and when you're coming home and I'll try to persuade Daddy not to have you traced." The eternal bargainer, up to her old tricks again.

"I can't," I said, slightly hysterical myself. "I have to be alone a little longer. Tell Daddy please not to worry."

"What will I tell Bradley if he calls?" Mother was obviously trying everything.

"Whatever you want, whatever occurs to your ingenious imagination. Tell him to go jump in the lake." I was trembling. The receiver slipped out of my fingers and clacked against the wall of the phone booth. I caught it and hung it back in its cradle. Then I stepped outside and stood perfectly still until my trembling subsided.

My plane was a big four-engine jet that made so much noise I thought my head would come off but once in the air it settled down and the silence around me was more comforting than anything I'd ever heard: it was so absolute. It was the first time I'd been in a plane without breaking out in nervous hives. The air, close and cleansed, tranquilized instead of oppressing me. I felt with it, in the plane. It was rather as if, during my journey from the ordinary to the incredible, all my previous reactions were being turned upside down, or reversed. I was Nicky through the looking-glass. A sense of strangeness had entered me like a double, an internal twin who looked like me but did everything I wouldn't have and nothing I would for those three days.

My neighbor in the double seat was a fat man who reminded me of Bradley's father, in fact I had to keep peering at him to make sure it wasn't Mr. Evers, a very odd sensation, undoubtedly explainable in psychological terms but still uncomfortable. As if he were following me or something. This man's stomach

was so large that, when the stewardess came by with his tray of dried-up sandwich, pickle chip, and cup of frozen pudding, there was no room for a pillow on his lap. He ate his food quickly and hungrily and noisily, the lettuce dripping out of his mouth like green saliva. I was tempted to offer him my meal because he was so hungry and I was so unhungry but then I decided I should eat and I was glad afterwards because I really needed the food. I dozed for a while and what woke me up was the fat man brushing my breast with his elbow. I kind of gave a start at this and from the way he apologized I thought it was an accident, but when I closed my eyes and he began to do it all over again I realized it was deliberate and that got me mad as hell. He was one of those men who just never grew up, who just can't wait to get away from the wife and kiddies for a day or two of anonymous fun. And being attractive has this drawback, among others: the repulsive men come at you just as fast as the decent ones.

So here I was, safe, I thought, confronted with yet another human being to deal with, another problem. It was too soon. But I handled it all right, I really did. (I wish I might have handled my parents so efficiently.)

First, I looked around the plane for an empty seat I could move to; there was none. So I had to settle with him right then and there. The new Nicky Hapgood took over and she was as snotty and nasty as the old one was accommodating. When she got through with the fat man, *he* was looking around for another seat.

I told him he was a lard-head (a descriptive phrase I'd read in *Confidential* magazine one time and never forgotten) and a dirty old man and that if he didn't take his greasy hand away (as I said, it was his elbow but you can't tell someone to take their greasy elbow away) from me this instant I'd ring for the stewardess. I also told him my husband was a district attorney in Missouri, who specialized in prosecuting sex criminals and that he was meeting me at the airport. And so on. All the time I was talking to this lard-headed business man I watched his face turn around

various emotions. First he was complacent, then astonished, then scared. I don't quite know how I managed to put all those lies together so convincingly but they worked. As I finished my little speech I was shaking and so was he. He mumbled something under his breath, looked around, as I said, and then beat it back to the washroom where he remained until someone complained to the stewardess and when he came back to his seat he read *Business Week* three times and never once gave me so much as a glance. He didn't bother to say good-by when we left the plane either.

I fixed his wagon all right. But I'll never do that again. That kind of thing makes me hate myself.

It was early afternoon when I arrived in St. Louis, a city utterly unfamiliar to me. But instead of being a tourist and seeing the sights, I went straight into the hotel that was the terminal of the limousine, registered as Marcia van Popper (a silly name that just "popped" into my head and I recognize now has something to do with my father but I won't go into that), and after being shown to my room, went right out again and into the nearest movie house. One of the movies had Glenn Ford in it, starring as a sheriff gone rotten. It really absorbed me; I forgot all about my problems. But the other one was a girls-in-the-lock-up thing and it made me so nervous that I had to leave before it was over—and thereby miss some of the Western too, which I was very sorry about.

There was another movie house, about a block away, blinking at me like a neon Mecca and I went in there. I'm hazy on what was playing there or who was in the pictures, partly because by this time I had such a fierce headache I thought I was going to throw up. I'd had headaches like it before, when I was much younger. They used to drive my mother wild and once she made me go through the whole routine to try to discover the cause: eye tests, blood tests, X-rays, and so forth. And in spite of all those doctors and all those examinations (I was sent through a battery of tests like a new piece of machinery or something) they never

could come up with an answer adequate to the pain. Anyway, getting one now depressed me and started me thinking about Mother and about how I maybe should begin to consider going home soon. This going anywhere wasn't getting me anywhere.

After leaving the second movie house I stumbled into a drugstore to buy aspirin and I figured I might as well get something to eat there, too, before going back to my hotel. The door of this drugstore was propped open and inside I could see it was very fluorescently light and noisy with a crowd of kids just a little younger than I was hanging around the soda fountain, teasing and laughing and it looked so typical and comfortable and I felt so beautifully alone. It was, for that moment, a sweet, full feeling.

I walked over to the magazine rack and thought about buying something easy to read in the hotel. But all I seemed to see were those awful pulp magazines with stories like "Sins of the Big City," "The Shame of Easy Friendships," "Girls Who Leave Home," "The Lost Legions of the Loveless," "White Slave Traders Rampant Again," "The Sin of Rejected Mother-Love," and "Rich Girl Plays and Pays." *Life* magazine featured on its cover the girl who had run away with her mother's gardener. It all had to do with me; it was a message, a warning to me. I couldn't escape the gigantic eyes I knew were following me. And then I watched with horror as every single person at the soda fountain turned around and stared at me. Or at least I *thought* they did. And one of the girls said, "That's her." Or I *thought* she did. At any rate I backed out of the store and ran all the way to my hotel and ran up the three flights of stairs to my room and stood (just the way one of the bad girls in the movie had done when the police were closing in on her with guns and tear gas) panting, with my back to the door and my heart on my tongue. As soon as I got my breath I undressed, turned out the lights, jumped into bed, and pulled the covers up to my nose, like a child afraid of bears in the room. I went to bed without eating but I considered myself terribly lucky to have escaped. Which shows

what kind of state I was in for I felt like a literal fugitive and feared the most dreadful punishments.

But then I kept alternating. One minute I was terrified of facing everybody but realistic enough to know that I couldn't vanish and the next minute I felt positively tipsy from the mysterious power of solitude. Not a soul on earth knew where I was or who I was or what I was doing. It was an intoxicating sensation that I did not want to relinquish. I could finally understand Thoreau and the hermits and everyone else who ever went off by himself. When you are alone you are a kind of Midas and your hoard, your treasure, is yourself.

That night was one of the worst I've ever lived through. It had a nightmare quality impossible to describe, coming at me from outside and manufactured inside as well. There was some kind of convention going on in the hotel and the corridors were like rivers of clamoring fish. The noise ebbed and flowed and woke me and lulled me and then intruded itself into my dreams. I remember dreaming that I was on a rocky coast somewhere, like Maine, and I was sitting on the grass with Danny. I was wearing shorts so it must have been summer. We were playing a game with little colored sticks and laughing, having a fine time. Then it began to thunder and Danny got up, scared, and ran out of sight, leaving me. I tried to rise but I couldn't; my legs would not unfold and I thought, well, I'll just sit here until the storm's over. I don't mind getting wet. But the thunder changed into an army of German soldiers wearing helmets with spikes, like in the First World War and a general was leading them over a hill and when he saw me he shouted "Achtung!" and the entire army pointed its rifles at me and got ready to shoot. I was screaming, "No!" and "Help!" when Bang! I woke up and doors down the hall were slammed and men and women, croaked and shrieking, were using my door as a buttress. I was shaking so hard from sheer terror that I had to get up out of bed. I had no book or magazine to read so I read the Gideon Bible for a while and that put me back to sleep.

It went on like that until almost dawn, with my dreams competing for the agony award and the noise outside my room providing the mechanism of horror. I think I prepared for death or torture about a hundred different times in a hundred different ways that night.

Things improved with the first signs of morning; they could hardly have got worse. My main problem seemed to be hunger, I was absolutely ravenous and thought I'd faint if I didn't eat soon but I was too frightened of my detective-furies to think straight.

So I dressed myself (that cotton dress was as familiar by now as my hair), rode downstairs, and started walking along the street looking for a place to eat breakfast, a busy place that would swallow me and make it difficult for my pursuers. I must have passed up five or six, unsuitable for various reasons. One where the man behind the counter gave me a fishy look, another which was almost empty, still another in which there were only men, and so on until I found the Show-Me Diner, colorless enough to seem safe. I sat at the counter and ordered two scrambled eggs, juice, toast, and coffee from a boy too busy to see me and as I sat waiting for my breakfast I allowed myself to look cautiously at my companions. The working women, biting into overbuttered toast with careful, pursed lips, the men in hats reading the morning paper, folding and unfolding it with bored precision. No one paid me any attention and I began to breathe a little easier, to feel more expansive and in control. It was the staring eyes I dreaded so much.

The peculiar thing about that breakfast was that the eggs were merely gluey, the juice and coffee only wet, the toast soggy sawdust. Nothing had any taste, just feel. The sensation sickened me and I found I couldn't finish my food. I just wanted to pay and get out. I asked the boy for my check.

"First time in here? I haven't seen you before." He poked the buttons on the cash register. "I know most of our regular breakfast customers."

"Yes," I said, "I'm from out of town. May I have my check now please?"

"Sure, lady. You from back East? You sound like back East."

"Yes, I'm from New York. Look, I'm in kind of a hurry please."

"Hurry? Now why should a pretty girl like you get herself all hot and bothered by being in a hurry. Can't even stop and talk. That's the trouble with you people from the East, always in a hurry." The boy held my check out of reach, peering at it as if to make sure it was right. He smiled at me with what I was sure was sinister knowledge.

"I'm late for an appointment, please!" My voice rose and I saw with horror that it had attracted attention. I dug into my purse, extracted the first bill I could find (I think it was a five), slapped it down on the counter, jumped off the stool, and ran out of the Show-Me. I stood outside, breathing hard, my heart pounding in my ears. I was terrified. I was terrified of everything and nothing, of everyone and no one, of life and of death.

Several minutes later I began walking again. I passed a large department store, turned back, and went in. It smelled of expensive perfume and money and new silk and clean leather. I felt safe here, as I had felt safe in the church the Sunday before. It was familiar and comfortable, and I was anonymous. I browsed awhile, first (as they say) in coats, then suits, then cocktail dresses. There were some things I would have liked to try on but every time a salesgirl approached me I fled; I couldn't even talk to one of *them*.

It was while I was riding the down escalator that I remembered Florence Goldwater, my reason for choosing St. Louis. So I stopped at a bank of phones and found the number in the book and called the Goldwaters'. A maid's voice said, "Goldwater residence."

"May I speak to Florence Goldwater, please?" My heart was bouncing against the roof of my mouth.

"Miss Florence, she's in New York," the voice said. "She's working there in New York City. Would you like to speak to her

mamma, Missuz Goldwater, she's in the library would you like to speak with her I'll tell her?"

"No. No, thank you," I said. I felt as if the last ship in the world was just sailing out of sight of the island I was stranded on.

"Ah, just a minute, please. Could you tell me where Florence is working in New York, please?" I just didn't want her to go.

"Just a minute, I'll get her mamma." And the voice put down the receiver and left me.

I was afraid to speak with Mrs. Goldwater. Practically in tears, I hung up and went out into the dusty afternoon. I was exhausted.

XVIII

I REALIZED that there wasn't much time. Unless I killed myself I'd have to go back soon. I mean I wasn't Judge Crater or Ambrose Bierce. I was just Nicky Hapgood and my hair was getting stringy, my dress wrinkled, and my spirit very faint. My money would run out, my talent go unclaimed, and I would just shrivel from loneliness and disuse.

And still I held on to one secret pleasure, this fantasy: my father pacing the living room, in control but rationalizing like crazy, and my old lady prostrate with attendant physicians. It was too good to give up, and this, I know, is a very selfish motive for hanging on just a little bit longer: I wanted them to suffer over me. I suppose I might have called home again but the very idea of emotions spilling all over the place was exhausting. I wondered about the detective that was looking for me; would he look like Trevor Howard? The fact that I might be costing Daddy money as well as causing him misery never occurred to me; I mean I'd lost all sense of obligation and was freewheeling in a universe of my own construction.

I decided I did not want to think about them any more. I turned furious. Why couldn't a grown person go off by herself without telling the whole world about it? Why wasn't Freedom of Move-

ment in the Constitution? We aren't free, of course. Someone is always watching us. And I don't mean God.

Well, there's evidence of how I was bouncing from one extreme to the other and back again. One minute I wanted to be held and cradled and the next minute I wanted all attachments permanently destroyed. The rock-bottom truth was hitting me: the farther away you get, if you aren't ready to leave, the more you're strangled by what's pulling you back.

But I still had that afternoon to cross like some difficult and craggy range of mountains or a stretch of parched and parching desert. I hoped, in an inadmissible way, to get lost in it, to be found delirious and vulnerable—altogether not responsible. To be found possessing rights to excuses which a reasonable person does not possess. Like a crime of passion, like that: they usually let the guilty party off lightly though there is no doubt he or she *did* commit the murder and perhaps even confessed. But how could I manage to lose whatever dignity I had left? And my God, I was so tired my shoulders curled over and around my chest and my feet dragged and my hands shook. I was a mess.

Is it revealing that during those three days I hardly ever thought about Bradley? Instead, events and incidents out of the past came and buzzed me, stuck to my memory like flies on a twist of sticky paper. Some of them I've written down and others not. I didn't choose to think about them; I found them impossible to avoid. And, taken altogether, I decided that they did not add up to very much. I mean I undersand I'm mortal (I *do* understand) but nevertheless—no *because*—I really should be better, be of some value to someone and to ME.

I hated myself so much then that I couldn't even stand to look at myself in the mirror—I was revolted by my own image.

I returned to the hotel and walked up to my room (by this time caution was automatic) and found a sheet of stationery and a pencil in the desk drawer and sat down to try to clarify my position on paper, like Benjamin Franklin. I went on like this:

1. Although I want to be destroyed (metaphorically) I don't really want to die, I would like another chance.

2. I want to be forgiven and absolved of responsibility. Otherwise I can't go back. I don't have the strength to be anything but helpless.

3. Question: How can I go back and face them without being blamed for my evident cowardice and guilt?

4. Answer: Go back disabled.

It helped me to put the numbers down; it made my screwy determination seem so orderly. A final question, namely, how I was going to explain myself when the time came, I left blank.

I was off again as soon as I'd finished this little exercise, torn it to pieces, and flushed it down the john. I started out by walking along the sidewalks, window-shopping with my head tucked down, fearful of being recognized by my detective (actually, no one gave me more than a mindless glance). A few times I stopped and looked around. I had worked myself up into one of those moods where everyone seems physically grotesque. Each face was made of soft dough across which a big playful hand had played, smearing features in a search for true ugliness. The faces were hideous, frightening me like Bosch faces. I convinced myself they were staring at me, horribly, as if I were some female pariah or a collaborationist. Of course they weren't even looking at me but as far as I was concerned they were ready to string me up. I was glad it was all going to end very soon.

Then there was this round thing inside me. Not hunger (although I hadn't had a decent meal in ages) but fear. It continued to expand, a regular balloon of fear that might burst or shrink—and it didn't much matter which, as long as it went away.

I got on a bus. I didn't know where it was going nor did I care; it was simply what I did then. I walked to the rear without thinking and sat down. A moment later a woman up front began squawking like a crow about me to no one in particular and I realized I was surrounded by Negroes: unofficial, illegal Jim Crow. So I got up and moved forward—only because I was afraid of a

scene. It seemed I could never escape that Southern shittiness. And people insist St. Louis isn't the South!

After a while I got off that bus and onto another. It was an easy way to keep moving and I didn't know what else to do. I can't describe what I saw out of the windows, mostly, I guess, because I was too numb to look very carefully. The buses moved through areas which seemed to repeat themselves, block after block, I mean like shoddy boarding houses or Negro slums or open-air markets. Then, on another (I must have tried four or five routes altogether) it would change and be some other kind of neighborhood stretching in front and in back in hazy and ominous monotony. I had a strong physical impression of being near the Big River. (I had been patient, too, but I was untrustworthy.) This was the river I thought of more as a solid thing than made of water. I wished I could be like Jim and drift away on it to freedom. I could smell the river and I could hear boats and temptation welled up inside me like tears.

I finally got fed up with riding on buses. It was going on rush hour and people began to get nasty and push. So I decided to use my legs again. I got off my last bus in a residential section; kempt, proper, boxy, it reminded me of home except for high iron gates that seemed to be guarding it against encroaching depression and the dark-skinned to the right and left.

The afternoon was about to disappear (I think of time as moving constantly and steadily like a conveyor belt on its way through a large dark building). I felt let-down and unsure as if the balloon had, after all, shrunk, leaving behind it an empty hole. It was becoming more and more difficult for me to do *anything* so in order to rouse myself I started saying, over and over, out loud, "now or never, now or never, now or never" until I did it. I let a car hit me.

Just like that. This expensive foreign car, like a curled-up black cat, came purring at me down the driveway of a handsome pink brick house and I stepped up from behind a tree and crack! The rear bumper tucked my legs up under me and I collapsed

without a sound. The car stopped with a shriek and a bounce and a woman came out of the driver's seat and rushed over to me. She was literally blank with horror. She screamed, "Oh my God, are you all right?"

I sat up and said, "I think so." My legs hurt terribly.

"Don't move, don't move," she cried. "Oh my God." I felt sorry for her. She thought I was the victim.

"I'll call an ambulance," she went on, turning to go into her house.

"No, please don't. I'm all right now." And to prove it I stood up. I must have been going on some extra power, like a boxer who gets to his feet so as not to be counted out, though he shouldn't be able to.

"Well, in any case, let me drive you to the hospital or my doctor; I can't just leave you here, you poor child." The lady was regaining her balance. She reminded me of Mrs. Evers a little, but tighter around the eyes, more in control. She was still desperately concerned that she might have hurt me badly, and showed it by hurrying.

"All right," I said. By now I was sure I didn't want to go with her, but I suspected that if I didn't sit down right away I would faint.

I climbed into the back and she slid into the driver's seat and started the motor again. It was strange how she didn't ask me any questions except whether I was okay. I was half sitting, half lying across the leather seat trying to decide whether I should dump myself in this woman's lap and let her take over or whether I should keep going when the car began a transformation. It was no longer a comfortable ambulance: it had become my hearse. I panicked. The woman's head, crowned by a little black pillbox, was as *impersonal and still as a dummy's*. A moment passed in which I felt I was in the Celestial Omnibus; a heavy mist had formed around us and the sun was almost gone. I would have sworn that we were leaving the ground. I began to tremble violently.

The woman stopped for a red light and as she did I opened the door beside me and hurtled through, somehow managing to land on my feet. Then I ran as fast as I could. My legs were like propellers, stiff, mechanical, and wild with speed. I don't know how far I ran but the woman, whom I could hear shouting after me, could not (or maybe did not want to) catch me.

Then, totally lost, at the end of everything, I allowed myself to pass out.

I remember waking without opening my eyes and being almost knocked out again by an odor I recognized from the Red Ridge infirmary and the hospital in England: disinfectant, ether, and disease. Then I heard noises I gratefully identified: coughs, complaints, trays rattling, whispers, squishy rubber soles. Good; this is what I intended.

It hardly mattered how I got there. They were thorough enough: still unconscious, I had been X-rayed from skull to toes. Then, after prodding and poking me to see if I were bleeding internally, my rescuers had stuck me in bed in a ward in the municipal hospital. They also looked in my wallet, found my name and telephone number, and called Daddy. My journey was finished and I could rest.

After I was sure where I was, I went back to sleep without anyone's knowing I had been awake. I slept for a day and a half straight. No dreams this time, no half-waking horrors, just sweet, sound sleep.

When I woke up again I was in a private room (what else?) and Daddy and Mummy were standing over me, one on either side of my bed like two angels of death.

"Nicky, darling, you're awake." My mother often says the obvious, believing it to be the same thing as compassion.

And Daddy, over and over, told me that everything was going to be all right, not to worry about a thing, I should just eat and rest and get well and things were going to be all right.

"I'm famished," I said, and they both beamed.

Not once while I was in the hospital in St. Louis did my parents press me about where I'd been or what I'd done during the three days I was missing. But they made me call Bradley, "It's the only decent thing to do," Mummy said.

"Nicky, Nicky, darling," Bradley's voice trembled on the edge of hysterical relief. "I was so sure something terrible had happened to you. Where were you, what happened? Why didn't you call me?"

"I'll tell you all about it," I lied, "when I get home."

"Oh my sweetest darling, are you all right? I wish you'd tell me where you've been. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Bradley, I'm all right. Just tired and a little black and blue. But they tell me I'm going to be able to play the violin again."

The joke was lost on him; he was too anxious for humor. "Now don't you worry about anything, honey, except getting a lot of rest. Then, when you're all recovered and rosy again we'll get ourselves married up and live happily ever after."

Poor beguiled Bradley Evers.

XIX

DADDY AND MUMMY stayed in St. Louis until the doctors said I could go home, just three more days. It turned out they were more concerned with my mental state than my physical. You see, no bones were broken and nothing inside me had been damaged; it was just those awful bruises on my legs and a cut on my head. But what the doctors were really concerned about, I found out later, was that I would try "it" (suicide) again. They were sure my accident was a suicide attempt and no matter how hard I tried to convince Mummy and Daddy, after we got home, that I had meant to hurt and certainly not kill myself, they did not believe me: the St. Louis doctors had got to them first. They must really have frightened Daddy because he's always thought psychiatry was a lot of mumbo-jumbo. The doctors said I was very confused and seemed to think things were hopeless and so forth and that if I didn't get some "outside help," as they delicately put it, I would probably try "it" again. They were quite wrong, of course. For the first time in a long time I was unconfused. I had shucked Bradley off and the enormous burden of indecision about *that* had consequently vanished. And I was clear about one thing: I knew I had to leave home. But I was saving this knowledge for the right time.

As soon as we got back to Hartford Daddy handed the psychiatry problem over to Mummy, the family medical expert, and she went about trying to find me a doctor with the same passionate thoroughness with which they had chosen Buttercup Hall for me.

One night, not long after she began looking, she gave Daddy one of her significant looks and Daddy said, "Nicky, your mother has found a psychiatrist for you to see. He can begin right away."

"Where's his office?" I said, fingering my trump card.

"Here in Hartford, of course," Mother said. "Dr. Fine's extremely busy but he's agreed to give you some time starting immediately."

"It's that desperate?" I said. "Why haven't you confiscated my razor blades and belts?"

"Nicky, please." My mother's voice conveyed weary hurt. She doesn't think I'm at all amusing when I talk about myself that way. As a matter of fact, since it happened, she's sort of gone into a social decline; I think she feels I've somehow shamed her.

"Okay," I said. "But nothing doing. I'm not going to have my head opened up unless it's in New York. I'm going to live there and take acting classes and, if you really insist, I'll see a psychiatrist too. But it's got to be my way. I've made up my mind." Hurrah for Nicky, I was shouting to myself, it's about time.

My mother threw a fit and then subsided into sobs of frustration. Daddy tried not to, but lost his temper anyway. But they finally gave in. What else could they do?

So poor Mother had to call up Dr. Fine, who released me, and start the search all over again. They agreed to let me take acting classes and they allowed me to rent a nasty room in a women-only hotel. And for my part, I had to agree to come home every other week end.

So that's my life. I see a few girls—Florence Goldwater and some kids from the class—for dinner or to go to the theater or movies with—and I date a few pallid men. I think I might someday get a part on daytime TV or something like that, but I feel pretty limp

about everything most of the time, I can't seem to get with it or work up much steam. And if there's one thing you need to get ahead in the theater it's plenty of steam.

I never saw Bradley again. Mummy finally recognized that my marriage to him would never take place and even *she* didn't see much point in our meeting again. I wrote him a marathon five-page letter, carefully explaining that I did not think I could make him happy and sort of putting the blame on me: I was too confused, too immature to know what I really wanted, I was going to this head doctor in New York, I was trying to see if I had any real acting talent, I had to be alone for a while to think and to be lonely. All the emotional clichés of the person who hasn't the courage to come out with one good reason, the one hard-to-take reason. I was sure my letter would upset him terribly; I could imagine him crying as he read it and then rushing North to try to convince me that I didn't mean it.

Not at all. Bradley simply wrote me, by return mail, saying he had felt this coming for a long time (had he, really, or was he saving face?) and that he agreed that no, I wasn't ready to be *anyone's* wife.

So easy.

And if it was so easy, why couldn't I write this letter earlier? I'm still not sure; that's part of what Daddy's paying Dr. Gouderbach to find out. He doesn't seem to be making much headway.

When I try to understand, something like this emerges: For a long time I was being swept along a river by too many strong currents, so much stronger than I, in fact, that I was dragged into a whirlpool. And before I could summon enough power to save myself, I had to touch bottom. And when I emerged I had been turned loose—set free—but I had also lost something. Something like the sense of expectation, or enthusiasm, or hope. I mean, for instance, with men. I'm so sure any involvement will end in disaster that I've turned cold. I complained about this to Dr. Gouderbach and he just nodded knowingly over the top of his glasses. "When a man kisses me," I said, "I don't even bother to

push him away, I just wait till it's over." Nod. "And when someone says 'Isn't that just great?' I say 'Yes,' though I never really think so." Nod again. Big help.

Danny, the one person I would honestly like to talk to, the one person who might understand, is in Germany, in the Army. He writes me long funny letters about life in the infantry (me and the daisy girl, Penny Johnson, who's wearing a diamond ring) and advice on how to survive. In an early letter Danny told me that Mummy told him that I thought *she* was crazy. Dr. Gouderbach, when informed, said Mummy was simply projecting, "ja ja, a classic example of projection." But knowing what it's called isn't terribly much help when you have to live with it. If she goes around and sticks on me all the nutty ideas *she's* got, what am I supposed to do? I suggested to Dr. Gouderbach that I quit for a while and send him my mother instead for the next month or so and he suggested right back that I wasn't really serious about tackling my problems. Dr. Gouderbach and I—let's face it—don't really see eye to eye.

Anyway, Danny's letters are sympathetic and funny but are no substitute for Danny in person. A couple of weeks ago he wrote me about how his company smuggled two ladies of the night into their barracks and kept them there, passing them around every night, for two weeks, the idyll ending only when the Captain discovered one of them taking a shower. They were getting back at the Captain, Danny wrote, by spreading the rumor that he was a charter member of the John Birch Society. It was nice to see that Danny, at least, hasn't lost his creative energy, in spite of the Army. He ended that letter soberly:

"I am glad you didn't marry Bradley, Nicky, but you know that already. You've gone through a rough time but if you think about it—as I have—you'll have to admit it was worth it. It's far better to be lonely than to be imprisoned and if you were forced, by some quirk in your personality (I'm being as brutal and honest as I can), to make your decision the hard way, you can console, no, *congratulate* yourself that you made the right one. Not everybody,

by a long shot, makes the right one even once in their whole lives."

One last thing: I have never told anyone, not even Danny, not Dr. Gouderbach (though he'll probably get it out of me, the salacious old goat) what I did in those three days. Daddy, when anyone else is around, pretends not to be curious, but those week ends at home! Five minutes after I've reluctantly parked my suitcase in my old room it starts all over again, the chorus: "Where were you before you went to St. Louis?" "What did you do with your ring?" "Why didn't you come to us instead of running away?" and Mother's voice, solo, "How could you be so ungrateful to us? I know you don't love me, Nicky, but at least you might show me some courtesy and a little gratitude."

So here I am, in a sense still trying to wake up from a nightmare. The trouble is I'm not convinced it will be worth it even if I can.

But I *do* go to every play by O'Neill that's running. He gives me the illusion that if I put enough muscle behind it, I too can be passionate.

